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# Children's Best Interests in Digital Policy and Practice

From the voices of children, youth and experts around the world

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# Introduction

The principle of the best interests of the child ('the Principle') is increasingly invoked in digital policies, regulations and corporate commitments worldwide. Yet, despite its growing prominence, there is still limited guidance on how the Principle should be understood and implemented in relation to the digital environment.[1] Children's perspectives remain largely absent from these critical debates, even though they are uniquely placed to articulate how digital technologies shape their lives and what they require for digital spaces to truly serve their interests.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) identifies the best interests of the child as one of its four foundational principles. UNCRC Article 3 states that: **"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."**

The Principle underpins every right set out in the UNCRC and applies to actions taken within digital contexts. As children's lives are increasingly shaped by digital technologies, platforms and online services, understanding and operationalizing the Principle in the digital environment has become essential to the effective protection and realization of their rights.

Children's perspectives on what constitutes their best interests in the digital age are central to this work. In recognition of the urgent need for formalized, rights-respecting consultation with children to ensure that policies, regulations and digital products reflect their lived experiences and voices, UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti launched the *Best Interests of the Child in Relation to the Digital Environment* project. The project is aimed at capturing the views of a diverse group of children on how they understand the Principle in relation to the digital environment, what they

1 The digital environment changes all the time, and includes online services and products (like platforms, apps and websites), artificial intelligence (AI) that drives recommendation systems, and the business models and company approaches that shape how technologies function and affect user experiences. This report uses the term online 'platform' as shorthand to capture a broad range of digital environments where children interact with technology, other users and content.

believe is or is not in their best interests online, and how they envision a digital future that better supports their rights and well-being. These insights are intended to inform policymaking, regulation and the design of digital environments. They will hopefully also shape the business models and operational practices of technology companies providing digital products and services to children.

A total of 17 participatory in-person consultations were held in seven countries – Brazil, India, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, Spain, Uganda and the United States of America (USA) – with 209 children of various ages from diverse socioeconomic, cultural and connectivity contexts. The sample was gender balanced, with similar numbers of girls and boys participating in each consultation. Creative, child-centred methods, such as drawing, modelling and role-playing were used in the consultations to create space for the children to articulate their experiences, concerns and hopes for digital environments. Detailed information on the data collection methodology, sample and study limitations is presented in Annex A.

To complement these perspectives, UNICEF pioneered a novel approach by convening a global network of adolescent and youth experts on the digital environment, who were able to interpret children's data and shape actionable policy recommendations through a process of participatory foresight. The project also engaged multi-sectoral practitioners, policymakers and technology developers through three global consultations with 23 experts to gather their insights on preliminary findings from child consultations. Collectively, the youth and expert contributions helped UNICEF to identify key challenges, tensions and opportunities for applying the Principle in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

# Project scope and target audience

The consultations with children, youth and experts were broadly guided by three questions:

- How does the best interests of the child principle relate to the other UNCRC principles and rights in the digital environment?
- What main points of tension arise when applying the best interests of the child in relation to the digital environment?
- How can policy and practice be used to uphold the best interests of the child in relation to the digital environment?

The project outputs are directed primarily at two audiences: government actors and technology companies providing digital services and products. A broad range of government actors are covered (acknowledging that their interpretation of the recommendations will differ by mandate), including those at the regional, national or local level who create digital strategies, policies and laws, such as policymakers and legislators, and regulators that oversee compliance. The aim is to inform policy, programming or advocacy to support government actors in ensuring that the digital environment is operated in children's best interests.

In addition to the primary audiences, the project outputs will hopefully add value to the efforts of other stakeholders working at the intersection of children and the digital environment. These include civil society organizations that monitor how governments and businesses fare in supporting children's best interests online and publicly hold them accountable, and academic institutions that conduct research into the impacts of 'best interests' platform features on children's rights.

## Notes on the report scope and content:

Throughout the project, an appetite for detailed guidance on how to uphold children's best interests in the digital environment has been expressed by government actors and technology companies. This report is a contribution towards that goal by giving a much-needed platform to children's voices on their best interests. With that focus, the report includes only high-level recommendations. Further research and work will be needed to develop comprehensive guidance on upholding children's best interests in the digital environment.

While the consultations were specifically designed to explore children's perspectives on their best interests in digital environments, the breadth and complexity of this concept meant that discussions often also addressed the challenges children encounter online, as well as the opportunities digital technologies provide. These perspectives are closely interconnected. Children's views on risks, opportunities and overall digital experiences should therefore be considered together in order to understand what constitutes a digital environment that is in children's best interests.

## Report structure

As the core of the project focused on consultations with children, the report is structured around children's key wishes for a digital environment in their best interests and the findings that support them. All findings are based solely on inputs shared by children who participated in consultations across seven countries. As this is qualitative research, the results are not intended to be statistically generalizable or representative.[2]

The analysis is organized into three main chapters comprising eight sections, each corresponding to a specific wish articulated by the child participants. To set the context for these findings, the report opens with a brief overview of how children interpret and understand their best interests in relation to the digital environment.

The second chapter examines how the digital environment can be better aligned with children's best interests. It brings together seven wishes voiced by children, which explore children's rights and the challenges they encounter in the digital environment. Each section outlines what children identified as not currently working in relation to the respective wish and, where proposed by the children themselves, highlights actionable solutions.

The third section focuses specifically on digital design features that support children's best interests. During the consultations, the children were prompted to reflect on specific platform features. The eighth and final wish focuses on four common features often used by platforms to protect children online. It addresses a final question of how digital features can be designed and implemented to better serve children's best interests.

2 References to 'the children' in this report refer exclusively to children who participated in the consultations, the findings should not be interpreted as generalizable to all children.

The report concludes with a set of high-level recommendations for governments and technology companies, drawing on insights gathered from children and those from youth and experts consulted throughout the project.

### Figure 1: Phases of research

**PHASE 1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Review of academic literature, non-governmental organizations' reports, frameworks and case studies on the Principle in the digital environment. UNICEF Innocenti published a 2025 working paper[i] on this literature, which was followed in 2026 by an update on policy, technology and practice developments.[ii]

**PHASE 2. PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN**

Child consultations conducted in seven countries using creative, play-based data collection methods to capture children's views on their rights and best interests online. The methodology was piloted, refined and implemented with trained facilitators; data were transcribed and translated by local partners, and analysed by UNICEF Innocenti.

**PHASE 3. YOUTH CONSULTATIONS**

Engagement with UNICEF's Youth Foresight Network to interpret findings through a future-focused lens, resulting in a youth consultation report with recommendations[iii] (see Annex B).

**PHASE 4. EXPERT CONSULTATIONS**

Consultations with 23 experts (see full list of participants in Annex C) from academia, government and industry to ideate actionable policy recommendations based on children's perspectives.[iv]

# Children's interpretations of their best interests in relation to the digital environment

Before presenting the specific preferences and recommendations of the participating children, it is important to understand how they define their own best interests in relation to the digital environment. This section summarizes several key themes that emerged during consultations when children described the conditions that either support or undermine their well-being online. Taken together, these insights illustrate how children conceptualize, understand and apply the notion of their best interests in digital spaces. Translating a complex and abstract concept such as 'best interests' across different languages posed challenges that may have inevitably shaped how children understood and discussed these issues.

**When children talk about their best interests in the digital environment, they do so mainly in practical, experiential and relational terms.**

The children's understanding of the digital environment was informed by day-to-day interactions with technology and framed by how digital spaces make them feel, what those spaces enable them to do and how they influence relationships, learning, safety and well-being. They described their best interests as balancing between benefits and risks, autonomy and protection, and performance and safety. They noted that digital environments are not inherently good or bad*: "Technologies are neither good nor bad in themselves*" (Spain, Madrid,[3] 14–17 age group). Rather, their impact depends on how they are used, moderated and contextualized. As one participant explained: *"If we are using technology, then it must have advantages. If there were only*

3 In countries where consultations were conducted in more than one city or region (India, USA, Malaysia and Spain), the region is specified in the quotes, otherwise only the country name is indicated.

*disadvantages, we would never have used it in the first place"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

### The children's accounts reveal a semantic gap in their interpretation of 'best interests' as what they enjoy in digital environments rather than as a rights-based concept.

When asked about their 'best interests,' children often instinctively interpreted the term in the literal sense, as what interests them and what they enjoy doing when online, rather than as a rights-based protective concept. When describing their best interests in this way, they most often referred to **play, entertainment, social connection and learning**. For example, younger children described gaming and video platforms as being in their best interests because they are enjoyable and help them to manage stress: *"I like playing Roblox because it's fun"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group). Across contexts, the children reported valuing the ability to build new connections and keep in touch with friends and family: *"The good thing is having friends on the apps, which allows us to be connected"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). While more nuanced discussions about balancing protection and entertainment online also emerged during the consultations, in many initial accounts, best interests were associated with **immediate benefits and a sense of enjoyment** rather than with broader considerations of protections, rights or digital service providers' responsibilities.

### The children sometimes frame certain practices that may expose them to new risks and harm as being in their best interests.

When discussing access to technology, digital platforms, learning tools and privacy in digital environments, the participating children predominantly framed these as being in their best interests. They often associated (early) access to phones and digital platforms with independence, competence and participation in the 'modern world.' Some expressed regret about not having developed digital skills earlier: *"I wish [mum] gave me [a] chance to learn about digital technology earlier"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group). From their perspective, access to technology supports autonomy, learning and social inclusion. Learning in digital environments was described in pragmatic terms, with some children viewing AI tools or video platforms as being in their best interests because they help them to understand schoolwork and acquire new skills. As a participant noted, *"if you don't understand something in class, you can access it later and understand it"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Nonetheless, some of the children recognized that these same practices can also expose them to harmful content, misinformation and unsafe interactions that they may not be prepared to navigate. For instance, some noted that relying on AI tools or other online platforms (such as Facebook or TikTok) for learning without adequate safeguards, supervision or critical literacy can undermine educational quality and increase exposure to misinformation: *"there are times when we are exposed to this fake news, and we do not know how to distinguish it"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). The older children recognized that privacy and anonymity can also enable harm, including abusive behaviour and cyberbullying. One participant noted that *"people think that just because they are behind a phone, they can say what they think"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

Their reflections revealed a degree of ambivalence: They value privacy, autonomy and the freedom to access and use content and platforms without restrictions, but not when these expose them to harm or allow others to act without accountability.

**The children's accounts reveal tensions between short-term practical gains and long-term implications for their rights and development.**

The children's accounts point to a tension between enjoyment and harm in digital environments and reveal contradictions about their perceptions of platform design in shaping these experiences. On the one hand, children described digital entertainment, such as gaming, social media, or streaming, as serving their best interests by providing opportunities for relaxation, enjoyment and social connection. On the other hand, their narratives also revealed experiences of loss of control, exposure to harm and diminished well-being.

Not all of the children connected the harms they encounter online and the systems that enable them. Such systems include profit- and data-driven business models, and gaps in governance and regulation, which together shape how platforms are designed and made available to end-users, including children. While some, particularly older adolescents, demonstrated awareness that certain platforms are intentional about maximizing engagement and time spent online,  they still too often framed their best interests in terms of immediate experiences rather than in relation to more abstract considerations of rights or long-term development.

Across age groups, the children described losing track of time – *"I don't realize it's been two hours"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group) – and recalled instances of feeling disoriented: *"TikTok is like a shopping mall. You enter, you don't see the time"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). Many, especially adolescents, attributed these experiences to deliberate design choices. But, despite recognizing these manipulative characteristics of some online platforms, they often continued to view the experiences of gaming, play, or viewing content as beneficial. Moreover, even when they acknowledged systemic drivers of risk or even harm, in some cases children internalized responsibility for excessive or inappropriate use, noting that it is how one uses digital platforms that makes them 'bad.' As one adolescent reflected: *"I don't think there is anything bad in itself, but it is the excess that makes it bad"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

**The children's experiences nonetheless highlight an opportunity to balance adult supervision with child-centred approaches to ensuring their best interests in digital environments.**

The children's perspectives revealed that how they understand their best interests in digital environments is dynamic, context dependent and relational. Alongside the tensions and challenges noted during consultations, the children also articulated what they think is in their best interests with notable maturity and insight. For example, they linked certain digital use to adverse mental and physical health impacts, including anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, body image concerns, eye strain and back pain, and some described how exposure to idealized online lives can erode self-worth, particularly during adolescence. They also identified the roles that parents, caregivers, other family members, teachers, governments and digital companies could and *should* play in supporting their best interests online, and they offered tangible recommendations for how these responsibilities could be fulfilled.

The solutions proposed by the children underline that ensuring their best interests in digital environments should be centred on their lived experiences of navigating these spaces. They highlighted the importance of striking a balance between protection and their autonomy to participate online, while also strengthening their digital literacy to help minimize potential risks and harms. Meaningfully upholding children's best interest, therefore, requires their active involvement – while working alongside adults – in developing

policies, tools and practices intended to protect and empower them online, so that decisions about solutions are made *with them*, not merely for them. As such, it is crucial for societies to complement normative interpretations of best interests with a child-centred approach grounded in children's own experiences and expertise. Such an approach would foster digital spaces that balance safety with autonomy, privacy with guidance and protection with respect for children's agency and evolving capacities. The suggestions and ideas provided by children in the following sections reveal how this approach could be put into practice in a way that respects children's needs, rights and opinions about their own digital well-being.

# Aligning the digital environment with children's best interests

## Wish 1. Improve safety, trust and protection in the digital world

> *"It's become a lawless land ... many things need regulation."*
> *– Brazil, 10–13 age group*

Across all contexts in the consultations, the participating children consistently called for online protection that actually works, emphasizing that digital spaces currently expose them to bullying, discrimination, scams, privacy violations and harmful or inappropriate content. Many described feeling unsafe, overwhelmed or discouraged from participating online, and they stressed that safeguarding children requires action from all actors: technology companies, policymakers, educators, parents, caregivers and communities. Younger children (10–13 age group) tended to focus more on personal risks such as cyberbullying and privacy breaches, while adolescents (14–17 age group)

highlighted broader systemic harms, including misuse of AI, misinformation and racial discrimination. An adolescent in California reported: *"Sometimes I'm playing video games with random strangers online ... I'm just exposed to racial slurs and derogatory terms ... it just makes me feel bad about myself"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

Children also described how harmful online experiences, combined with excessive screen time, affect both physical and mental health. Younger children often mentioned physical strain, particularly eye discomfort from prolonged screen use, while adolescents spoke more about distraction, anxiety and deteriorating mental well-being. A child in Malaysia explained, *"Playing too many games can negatively affect studies"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group).

Across countries, children reported encountering violent, hateful, misleading or adult content online that often left them feeling unsafe or distressed. They also described experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying, peer-to-peer harm and toxic online communities that made digital spaces feel hostile: *"Hate speech ... It is too easy to bully"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

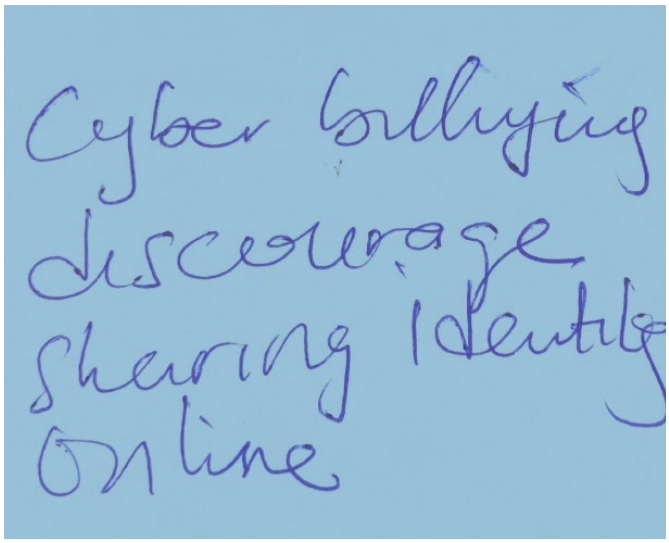


Photo from child consultations.

These and other concerns are explored in greater detail in the following sections. The children expressed a clear and unified message: Online environments must become safer, and this requires coordinated, collective action. They do not view safety as the responsibility of a single actor. Instead, they see a need for collective effort by governments, platforms, schools, families and communities to ensure better enforcement of existing regulations, stronger safeguards and more effective protection from online harms.

## 1.1 Platform regulation and accountability

> *"Companies should start thinking about the people behind the screen."*
> *– USA, California, 10–13 age group*

The consulted children, particularly adolescents, called for laws and regulations that more effectively uphold their rights and that are better enforced, which would offer greater accountability. They repeatedly mentioned the need for **more robust online protections,** citing risks ranging from cyberbullying and harmful content to data misuse and exploitation: *"I strongly wish that everyone is ensured safety along with complete privacy and security"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

Across nearly all contexts, the children viewed **governments as central actors** in ensuring online safety through regulation, monitoring and public awareness. They saw governments as responsible not only for setting rules but also for enabling safer and more inclusive digital access: *"The government should require companies to comply with a set of requirements for digital products used by children"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group).

This framing positions **governments as both guardians and enablers**, tasked with ensuring that digital participation is safe, equitable and empowering for all, especially younger children. In some contexts, such as India and Malaysia, the children also highlighted the government's role in infrastructure development and inclusion, noting that meaningful internet access – fast, reliable and affordable connectivity – is needed to ensure that child rights in digital environments are treated as entitlements, not privileges (explored further in chapter 6).

Adolescents demonstrated greater awareness of large-scale protections, such as regional data regulations or platform-level privacy practices. Children in Sierra Leone and Malaysia referenced individual-level, personal actions, whereas adolescents in Spain and the USA focused more on institutional safeguards: *"On the positive side, the European Union is working on data restriction"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). However, in some cases children also demonstrated too much trust towards digital providers and a lack of awareness regarding potential risks when sharing their data: *"Most apps don't share your name or very personal information ... like, they'll ask for your address, but they won't share it out"* (USA, Georgia, 14–17 age group).

In addition to calling for greater government responsibility, many of the children also demanded stronger **corporate accountability**. Across consultations, technology companies were frequently identified as both **key culprits and essential changemakers**. The participants identified corporations as the primary architects of their digital environment and therefore the actors that can, and must, design it to better serve their best interests. The assignment of responsibility was clear for a participant in Sierra Leone: *"The ones making the apps. Because the government does not tell them to make it, but they just go on to make it"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Throughout the report, children's ideas on how to create digital environments in their best interests are highlighted in blue.

The children urged companies to design safer platforms, prioritize well-being over profit and ensure privacy and data protection: *"I wish that children should be protected from all kinds of online threats"* (India, Madhya Pradesh (MP), 10–13 age group). Some imagined bold collective innovation, including: *"All tech companies should delete their apps and collaborate to make one good one"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

A recurring concern, particularly in Brazil, was the **lack of effective moderation by and accountability from platforms**. The children criticized content regulations that they felt do not always function effectively and voiced the perception that companies prioritize profit over safety. As one child noted: *"The platform profits, and it forgets about the rest, whether it's a child or an adult"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). Another highlighted the inadequacy of moderation systems: *"On TikTok, they block a word, but a video [with problems or inappropriate content] stays there"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). These frustrations were echoed in calls for clearer responsibility: *"If a child is accessing a site that is not suitable for them, where is the owner of that site, where is the platform?"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

The children's views reflected broader scepticism about whether digital platforms genuinely prioritize young people's well-being: *"Sometimes good, sometimes not so good"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group). A participant in Spain expanded on that thought: *"Depends: It can help you discover new things, and in the end this is a world, and you have to try things and enjoy them or say that I don't want them after having tried them. In the end, it is good as long as the information is not shared later, and that you are not forced to buy something, and that it has generated a need for you. Like Google, which monitors what you need,*

*and analyses everything a little, and then uses that data and that information against you or for its good. As long as that is not the case, it is good"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

These perspectives point to a clear need for greater accountability and child-centred and child-adaptive design in digital environments. The children proposed practical steps such as creating safer and more positive apps, introducing restrictions to protect minors, and **ensuring privacy and data security**. Others argued that governments should require companies to meet **child-centred design standards**, echoing an emerging global discourse around digital policy. In short, the children perceived companies as being part of both the problem and the solution so that they either need to act responsibly and ethically or be held to account.

### Safe and trusted guidance for digital use

When discussing who should help to make their envisioned digital futures a reality, by prioritizing safety and protection online, participating children frequently highlighted the role of parents and caregivers, who they described as crucial partners, but not controllers. The children explained that they want **guidance with trust, not surveillance**: *"Parents should be reasonable, like in terms of moderating the children and just like anything regarding that"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

Some of the children also addressed the importance of **trust and open communication** within families, especially when online risks arise. According to one participant, *"Families must trust their children"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group), while supporting them as they navigate their digital lives.

Many of the participants acknowledged the positive role adults can play in promoting safe digital behaviour, especially through screen-time limits, content filtering and education. Some children noted that managing their time online can be challenging, suggesting that parental support can be helpful in developing healthier habits and routines. Overall, the children consistently highlighted the essential role of parents and caregivers in protecting their children's best interests online, especially when adults are equipped with the necessary digital skills and understanding. A participant in Spain recalled: *"When I was little, my father … explained to me how to navigate [the internet] safely"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Across contexts, the findings suggest that the involvement of parents and caregivers is seen as constructive when it balances protection with trust and education. However, overprotection and excessive control by parents were noted as being contrary to children's best interests.

## 1.2 Children's participation and digital citizenship

> *"I wish our voices can be heard on digital environments, and we can succeed to show ourselves."*
> *– Uganda, 10–13 age group*

Throughout the consultations, the children consistently stressed the importance of having their voices heard in decisions about digital spaces. Across countries, they made it clear that they do not see themselves as passive recipients of protection but as active agents of change. The children framed digital safety and well-being as a **shared responsibility** rather than the task of any single actor. While they recognized the crucial roles of governments, technology companies and families, they also stressed that young users must be meaningfully involved in creating safer and more inclusive digital environments: *"Everyone needs to come together and fix the problems in the digital world to make it safe"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

This strong sense of agency reflects children's eagerness to contribute to safer, kinder and more creative digital spaces. Many children also expressed concerns about being excluded from discussions that affect them or being silenced online. They wanted their perspectives to matter in shaping the digital world that is in their best interests. One participant perfectly captured this view: *"I wish whatever we have discussed here reaches the parliament again, and I wish our voices can be heard"* (Uganda, 10–13 age group). Another noted the frequent absence of children's voices in public debates on topics that affect children: *"And yet, no child is consulted, but adults are giving their opinions"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group).

Despite these frustrations, many children expressed appreciation for being listened to during the consultations. Feeling heard and recognized was a key takeaway for children across all contexts, as one participant made clear: *"Thank you, sir, for inviting us here today. I felt good meeting friends. And it felt*

*especially good because today's day was for us, meaning here they called us, asked about the thoughts of our mind. Felt good. Usually, things like this don't happen – elders don't normally pay so much attention to younger ones like us. But today, they did. That's why it felt good*" (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).


Photo from child consultations.

Across the consultations, the children demonstrated that they are not passive consumers of digital spaces but thoughtful stakeholders with clear ideas about what needs to change. Their willingness to revise their views depends on tangible improvements in the digital environment that prioritize safety, well-being and inclusion for all children.

This emerging sense of collective ownership reflects the development of digital citizenship among young people. They understand that the challenges of the online world are systemic but solvable through cooperation and accountability. As one child put it: *"Everyone's participation is needed – children themselves, parents, teachers, government, police"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group).

## A shared ecosystem of accountability

Taken together, these insights reveal a multi-actor ecosystem in which children envision digital transformation emerging through cooperation across a web of accountability connecting governments, companies, schools, families, communities and children themselves. No single actor holds the full solution; safety and empowerment can only arise when each fulfils their role: *"I think we should like come together as a community and like take a vote on the safeties of social media and like how to make it better"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

The children called for governments that protect without censoring, companies that innovate ethically, parents who guide with empathy and youth who participate with purpose. In their collective imagination, a safer, more just, participatory and human-centred future awaits.

# Wish 2. Strengthen privacy protection and enable better data control

> *"Private info should be respected and not be sold/sought after by companies."*
> *– USA, California, 14–17 age group*

When describing their wishes for a digital environment that supports their best interests, the children consistently called for stronger privacy protections, fewer demands for personal data and information, and greater control over how their information is used and shared. Many expressed a desire for more privacy and safety without more prohibitions, suggesting a preference for balance rather than extreme or limiting solutions. Their views highlight a persistent tension between children's right to privacy and the intentions of governments, companies, parents and caregivers seeking to protect children from online harms and, in some cases, companies' data collection practices for monetization.

The children's understanding of privacy varied by age, digital literacy and cultural context. Younger children (10–13) tended to focus on concrete elements such as passwords, logins or specific apps. Adolescents (14–17), however, were more likely to raise systemic concerns about data exploitation, surveillance and commercial misuse. Yet, across all countries and age groups, the children described privacy as a fundamental element of a digital environment that genuinely supports their best interests.

## 2.1 Privacy and data use in children's digital lives

Many of the children expressed concerns about how digital technologies **can undermine their right to privacy**. They described fears related to **data misuse, surveillance, unclear or confusing consent mechanisms**, and risks posed by not only platforms but also peers. Across contexts, their worries converged around similar themes: discomfort with how personal information is handled; anxiety about being judged, misunderstood or exposed without consent; and uncertainty about maintaining anonymity or control over their data.

Beyond concerns about how companies use children's information, a major recurring fear was that peers or adults might take screenshots, alter content or weaponize private messages. The children repeatedly noted that once

something is shared online, it is no longer under their control. Issues of bullying, shaming and **exposure of private information** were commonly expressed concerns, with the participants fearing both peer-driven and adult misuse of their data. As one participant put it: *"You finally tell someone and they might leak it … what if they screenshotted what you said?"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

**The exposure of photos or private data online without consent** were further concerns raised by the children. Younger children, in particular, expressed worries about photos or videos being taken and shared without their permission, especially in school or public settings. As one explained, *"People can take pictures of you without your consent and can post … and you can't do anything about it"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

Adolescents were more likely to raise concerns about identity misuse, including **impersonation, fake accounts and misrepresentation**. They expressed fears that false identities or altered content could damage their reputation or expose them to scams. Similar worries emerged in India and Uganda, where children described hacking, misuse of personal photos and the creation of fake social media accounts. As one explained, *"Hackers can compromise our privacy by gaining unauthorized access to personal accounts"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group). This concern was echoed in Uganda: *"Some people have a diary on their phones. Now we have what we call hacking. Someone can hack into your diary and expose your private information"* (Uganda, 10–13 age group). A participant in India noted: *"I hope that when I upload a photo online, it will not be modified or tampered with in any inappropriate way"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

Across contexts, the children also expressed discomfort with platforms **collecting unnecessary data**, particularly through cookies and access-conditioned consent prompts. Younger children often viewed cookies as intrusive even when they did not fully understand them. Older adolescents voiced frustration with coercive data practices, though some held misconceptions about how these tools work, highlighting the need for stronger digital literacy: *"Acceptance of cookies is required for access, and that allows the website to access all your information"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

In India and Brazil, many of the children believed that their phones listened to conversations and delivered targeted advertising based on what they said aloud: *"It's happened to me that I've spoken aloud about wanting an item and then ads appear around it"* (Brazil, 10–13 age group).

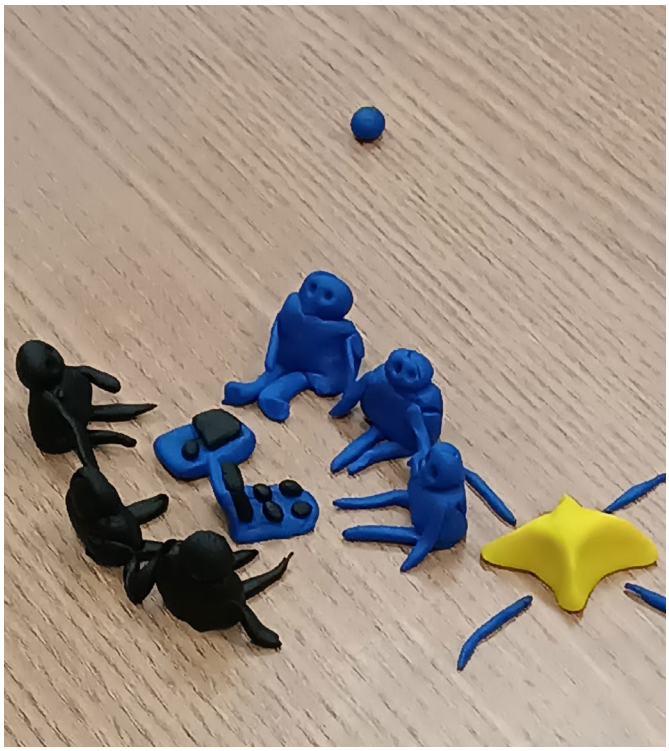

Photo from child consultations.

The children consistently objected to apps requesting what they perceived to be unnecessary personal information when registering. Many were highly protective of their location, phone number and real name, fearing that sharing such details could lead to **stalking** or other harms. In Brazil and Sierra Leone, these concerns often bridged digital and real life contexts, and included the threat of violence or stalking. As one child explained: *"There are some slightly unstable people all around the world who will like to see your picture or video on social media and start stalking you. This is not safe, not private"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Adolescents, particularly in the USA, identified more advanced forms of privacy violations, including IP scraping, the sale of personal data and **doxxing**, which involves publicly revealing personal or sensitive information about someone without their consent, often with the intent of harassing or embarrassing them.

## 2.2 Factors shaping children's privacy online

The findings from the consultations show that children want to express themselves online, but on their own terms. While they enjoy sharing aspects of their personalities, interests and creativity, many choose to limit how much personal information they reveal. This instinct for self-protection is closely linked to the broader privacy concerns discussed in section 2.1. For many of the participants, managing what others can see, and deciding who counts as 'others,' is central to feeling secure online: *"I wouldn't tell things about my private life – food, favorite, family, data ..."* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group).

Across countries, the children described a wide range of **strategies for managing their online visibility**. These included making accounts private, restricting who can view posts or profile pictures, blocking unwanted contacts and only sharing content with trusted people.

Private or locked accounts were among the most common tools for controlling visibility. As one participant explained: *"I lock my profile picture to allow only those I want to view it"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group). The children frequently mentioned using privacy settings to limit access to their information, including: *"On WhatsApp, I lock my conversations because some funny people would pick them up without me seeing and watch them"* (Brazil, 10–13 age group).

**Selective sharing** also emerged as an important strategy. The children in India highlighted how message-based platforms give them more control over who sees their content. As one explained: *"If you want to send it to someone through WhatsApp, you can send it. It will not be available to everyone, it will be available to the person to whom you give it"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group).

Blocking remains a widely used tool, especially among adolescents, who may encounter more frequent unwanted contact or harassment. The children viewed **blocking** as both a protective measure and a way of asserting boundaries: *"I block numbers/people who tend to bother me online"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group).

For the younger children in particular, **passwords** symbolized control over identity, access and personal space. Passwords for phones, apps or individual accounts are considered the first line of defence, and the participants emphasized the importance of keeping them private and using strong login protections.

These practices show that children actively manage their digital presence and often compensate for platform weaknesses through their own strategies. Despite these efforts, children may not be aware of the other ways in which digital services may impinge upon their privacy, such as through pixel tracking or browsing histories.

### Children's expectations for better privacy and control

While children take many steps to protect themselves, the participants questioned whether platforms provide sufficient or reliable tools to safeguard their privacy or are acting in their best interests. Many of our participants expressed scepticism that current features fully protect them. As one noted, *"Even if you make it private, people can still find you"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

The children consistently called for platform tools that would allow them to better customize who can see their data, as well as when and in what ways that data is accessible. Many expressed their appreciation for existing features giving them **control over visibility**, including: *"Settings like keeping your account private is good"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

Some of the children discussed a need for platform features to give them more control over their images and content, including: *"Only the person whose identity will be known can edit their video, or no one else can use their video or photo without their permission"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group). Another explained: *"And you can also do it so that no one else can upload his photo. Like if it is my photo, then only I can upload it, no one else can upload it"* (India, MP, 14–17 age group).

The overall message was clear: Children do not want their photos and videos to be used without their consent. Some participants also expressed the belief that **AI systems could be used to monitor and flag the misuse of personal content**. A participant in Uganda was very clear on this topic: *"But the real problem, like anti-hatred comments and misuse of photos, must be addressed. So, solution – add privacy tools to stop others from using photos without permission, use AI filters to block rude comments"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group).

Across countries, the children expressed a desire for platforms to respect their identities and boundaries. They want systems that allow them **to personalize their online presence** without demanding unnecessary data or exposing them to unwanted risks: *"I wish they didn't ask for so much data and we didn't have to pay to have cool stuff"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group).

Overall, children want digital environments where they can express themselves confidently and creatively while retaining meaningful control over their audience and personal information.

# Wish 3. Foster empathy, respect and inclusion in digital communities

> *"I want a digital world without judgement, prejudice and inequality."*
> *– Brazil, 14–17 age group*

Across countries and age groups, the participating children described a strong desire for digital spaces where people treat each other with empathy and respect to foster a culture of inclusion. Many spoke about the discrimination, exclusion and everyday hostility they encounter online. While they recognized the value of digital tools for communication, creativity and community-building, they expressed concerns that the online world too often amplifies hate, judgement and unequal treatment.

## 3.1 Online behaviour and interactions

When discussing why the digital environment does not always support their best interests, the children frequently pointed to toxicity and mistreatment. Many had witnessed or experienced **discrimination and cyberbullying** firsthand, particularly in games and on social platforms, where anonymity and the ease of creating fake accounts allow harmful behaviour to flourish. A participant in Brazil explained their concerns: *"I wanted to talk about the issue of being a lawless land, that people think that just because they are behind a phone, they can say what they think … And the internet is a place that normalizes a lot of things, like fatphobia, racism. And if you apply this in everyday life, you know it will go wrong, but on the internet, no one will see you. You can create a fake account and say what you really think, and no one will know who you really are"* (Brazil 14–17 age group).

Experiences of online **criticism or harassment** discouraged some of the participants from continuing to post about activities they once enjoyed. A child in India stopped sharing recordings of their singing after receiving negative comments, while another who loved editing reels stopped posting due to repeated discouragement. Some of the children noted how fake accounts make it difficult to identify bullies and increase their sense of vulnerability. Many described how constant judgement and comparison can **undermine confidence and limit self-expression**: *"People make hurtful comments that make most people less confident and won't express themselves as much"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

The children were particularly **afraid of expressing aspects of their identity**, such as sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion, online. In Brazil, the children noted that society often fails to acknowledge or respect the preferences, characteristics and needs of diverse social groups, particularly in relation to race, skin colour and gender identity, including those who identify as LGBTQI+. Many of the children reported worrying that being open about who they are could attract harassment, and they shared examples of how discrimination and intolerance influence what they feel safe revealing about themselves. As one participant noted: *"People make fun of LGBTQI online by doing pronouns like alpha/wolf to mock they/them"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

Across contexts, the children expressed a shared wish for a digital world where differences are respected rather than punished.

## 3.2 Inclusion and belonging in digital communities

Despite their concerns, the children also described the digital world as a space rich with opportunities to **connect, support one another and find belonging**. Many valued being able to stay in touch with friends and family across distances and participate in shared interests. For many, online spaces provide vital **representation and community**, especially for those who feel isolated or marginalized offline. As a participant in Brazil explained, *"Finding people, the LGBT community, for example ... [feels that] they don't belong where they live, so on the internet they find people to create a community"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).


Photo from child consultations.

The children highlighted how digital platforms enabled them to find others who share their interests or challenges, **creating communities** that affirm their voice and identity, for example, as participants in Brazil noted, through a *"WhatsApp group [used] with my friends to talk about everything"* (Brazil, 10–13 age group), or *"On Discord, there are groups about anime arts, etc."* (Brazil, 10–13 age group).

Some of the children expressed appreciation for how digital communication can reduce the barriers they experience in face-to-face interactions due to shyness, stigma or disability: *"Chatting virtually is more comfortable because no one is looking at you"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). Another child explained: *"Let's say there is a sensitive topic you want to discuss … you can send a text message … you don't have to worry about their facial reaction"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Finally, the children also saw digital platforms as powerful tools for speaking up: *"By giving your own contribution on certain development[s] in your environment, whether it's a picture or voice"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group), digital platforms can spread positivity and advocate for change, so that *"We can voice out to change others"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group).

Across all contexts, the children shared the same hope for a digital environment where they could show who they are without risking harm. Building such spaces will require not only better protections but also a collective commitment to empathy, respect and inclusion.

# Wish 4. Invest in learning and digital literacy for today and the future

> *"I want my future to be full of education."*
> *– India, Assam, 14–17 age group*

Across countries and age groups, the children consistently voiced the view that education is central to their digital futures, not only in terms of access to learning but also in how learning is delivered. When asked to reflect on whether digital technologies support their best interests, many of the children agreed that they do, with **learning and educational opportunities** mentioned as a key reason. The children stressed the value of greater access to information, more personalized learning experiences and the ability to explore subjects that may not be available offline.

## 4.1 Access to learning and knowledge

The children recognized the important role of digital technologies in upholding their right to learn, particularly through improved **access to educational content and platforms**. Some of them noted how tools such as educational websites, learning apps and online videos support learning by making it easier, more engaging and more enjoyable. As one child put it, digital tools allow them to *"access information that can be useful"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). The children in Brazil similarly explained how the internet broadens their understanding of the world: *"I often learn about other languages and cultures on the internet. I listen to people who live in other places. Things you don't know and you can learn"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

A recurring theme across countries was the benefit of being able to **learn anytime, anywhere**. Digital technologies make education more flexible and continuous, enabling children to study beyond school hours and physical classrooms, as is particularly valuable in places where school time or resources are limited: *"It helps me to learn at home after school hours"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Similarly, some children in India described how digital platforms had helped them to better understand school subjects, as they often turn to YouTube or similar platforms to reinforce classroom lessons. These platforms also offer a degree of personalization, allowing children to explore topics they find interesting or difficult: *"I know websites that we use in school too that help me*

*with learning subjects that I haven't really been able to learn in class, but outside of school I can actually get and understand the subjects with some websites*" (USA, Georgia, 14–17 age group).

Overall, the children did not see online learning as a replacement for formal education. Instead, they saw it as an important complement, providing a means of deepening understanding and **enhancing school-based learning**. Only in one case, in Uganda, did digital tools emerge as an alternative to formal education, especially for those facing financial or structural barriers: *"I'm not in school but I want to join year 10, because I want to be a civil engineer. But due to a lack of financial support, I self-teach. I download work and study myself, because if I get a chance to go back, I don't want to start over"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group).

Some of the children also recognized the social dimension of digital learning. Specifically, they noted that digital tools support not only individual study but also **group learning and peer support** by, for example, facilitating the sharing of lessons and discussion of topics, while also allowing children to study together in online group chats. In Brazil, the children reported using messaging platforms for informal group learning: *"We learn together when we share videos in our WhatsApp group"* (Brazil, 10–13 age group). The children in Malaysia also mentioned *"being able to call friends to discuss about homework"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group).

Beyond formal education, the children reported using digital tools to acquire **practical and creative skills**, from cooking and DIY to technical and vocational training. This broadened their understanding of 'learning' to include both academic and life skills: "*I use TikTok for learning tricks and DIY ideas"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group). In India, several children spoke about learning coding and digital skills online, noting that such learning supports their studies and future aspirations: *"I used to learn coding from the internet. That helped me in my studies"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

Across these diverse contexts, the children recognized that many skills once learned offline, such as cooking, sewing and sketching, are now accessible digitally. This evolution reflects how digital technologies are transforming not only what children learn but also how and where they learn, shaping a future where education is increasingly self-directed, inclusive and connected.

## 4.2 Information integrity, misinformation and overreliance on AI

While the children clearly recognized and valued the educational benefits of digital tools, participants also expressed strong concerns that these technologies may not always serve their best interests in learning. During the consultations, they highlighted key risks such as misinformation, restricted access, distractions, inequity and overreliance on technology, which can undermine their right to learn and ability to develop to their full potential.

A recurring concern across contexts was the spread of **misinformation and fake content**. The children worried that false or misleading information could distort their understanding, or undermine their learning process, with long-term consequences. This issue emerged in every country but was especially pronounced among younger participants, who may lack the media literacy to critically assess online content: *"So many things online are so not true and you could believe these things that can impact the rest of your life badly"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group). Older adolescents (14–17) further highlighted the false sense of credibility that AI-generated content can convey when used uncritically: *"Sometimes the internet gives us the wrong ideas"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group). The UNCRC General Comment No. 25 on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment states that children should be protected from harmful and untrustworthy content. To uphold children's best interests entails considering the full spectrum of rights, thus such protections should also recognize children's rights to information and freedom of expression.[v]

## CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE ON AI: AN EMERGING PRIORITY

Although AI was not an explicit focus of this research, it surfaced organically in every consultation, as can be seen throughout this report, demonstrating its growing presence in children's daily lives. The children showed awareness of the dual nature of AI, so while they value its educational benefits, they also articulated clear concerns about the associated risks, revealing a more nuanced understanding than is often assumed.

Yet the findings suggest significant variations in the children's understanding of AI's capabilities and limitations. This highlights an urgent need for comprehensive AI literacy initiatives to address misconceptions. One child's comment on AI and data privacy illustrated this gap: *"[AI] gives you a sense of protection knowing that not all that you tell some apps will be spread on the internet. Like when you are using ChatGPT you can tell it confidential information and it won't tell anyone at all"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Despite widespread and increasing AI use among young people, their perspectives remain largely absent from policy discussions about AI and children's best interests. The evidence gathered through this project represents a rare and essential contribution towards addressing this gap, but it only scratches the surface. Global research and sustained engagement with young people are needed to generate the nuanced, context-specific insights required to design inclusive AI systems and policies that genuinely uphold children's rights across diverse settings. Further insights and quotes about AI and children are available on the project website.

Across countries, the children also voiced concerns about **AI-generated disinformation** and its broader societal impact. As a participant explained: *"Fake news, in videos created by AI ... AI should have a control to understand why the person wanted to create this content. Disinformation generates a lot of bad things in society"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). Another child expressed a desire for more transparent, accountable algorithmic systems: *"100% accuracy on AI platforms"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group). These comments reflect a strong call for accuracy, transparency and accountability in AI and digital platforms, as these elements are essential to ensuring children's best interests are protected in online learning environments.

Another recurring theme was **overreliance on AI tools**, which many participating adolescents felt could undermine independent thinking and authentic learning. Several worried that AI could weaken people's ability to

think and analyse: *"AI is replacing thought and analysis"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). As a participant explained, *"You can just ask it to write an essay for you … then you're not really knowledgeable in that subject"* (USA, Georgia, 14–17 age group).

Other concerns raised by the participating children related to **digital distractions**, such as social media, advertisements and unregulated content, which they believe can divert attention away from meaningful learning: *"Advertisements are one of the things that bother me when I'm doing work"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group).

Finally, the children expressed ongoing concerns about **privacy and data protection**, particularly when using educational platforms and AI tools for learning and homework: *"Children use the internet without knowing what cookies are … it accesses a lot of information"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Taken together, these perspectives show that while digital tools can support learning, they must be designed, developed, implemented and governed in ways that support information integrity and children's independence. This can be achieved by increasing the accuracy of outputs, reducing disinformation, preventing overreliance on digital tools and ensuring sound data governance to protect children's privacy and other rights.

## 4.3 Barriers and inequalities in digital learning

Across the consultations, the participating children described a range of **barriers that limit their right to education in digital spaces**. These challenges reflect not only individual challenges, such as restrictive filters, paywalls and limited access to localized content, but also deeper inequalities between and within countries, shaped by income levels, infrastructure and policy environments.

### Restrictive filters and paywalls

In high-income contexts, specifically in the USA, many of the children highlighted the restrictive nature of school filters and monitoring systems (e.g., GoGuardian). While intended to ensure digital security, these tools were often perceived as making learning unnecessarily difficult by limiting academic freedom and restricting access to legitimate educational resources. As a participant noted, *"Some schools have everything blocked, making it hard to access something"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group).

Across both high- and low-income settings, **paywalls and economic inequalities** were also identified as major barriers to accessing quality educational content. Children consistently noted that learning resources (apps, courses and platforms) often require payment or subscriptions, putting those from lower-income families at a disadvantage. A participant in India explained: *"At times, the expense prevents us from downloading an app needed for learning"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

These experiences illustrate how digital learning can reproduce or even deepen existing inequalities rather than bridge them, especially when cost becomes a barrier to participation.

### Connectivity and infrastructure gaps

While paywalls were mentioned across all countries, children in low- and middle-income contexts such as India, Uganda and Sierra Leone also described how **poor internet connectivity and unreliable electricity** directly restrict their ability to engage in online learning. This contrasts sharply with issues in the USA or Spain, where the concern is more about information quality or excessive blocking, highlighting a digital divide in not only access but also experience. In high-income countries, access is generally stable, while in low-income countries, connectivity challenges make learning inconsistent and heavily dependent on geography and household resources.

These findings highlight a **digital divide in both access and experience**: While children in wealthier contexts worry about excessive filtering or paywalls, those in lower-income regions often struggle to connect at all. Inequities in access also emerged in other areas, such as play and health, and those are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter (Wish 5. Ensuring equity, accessibility and affordability of digital technologies).

## 4.4 Digital literacy and education for safe use

The participants demonstrated a strong understanding of the balance between their rights to access information and to protection from harm. They acknowledged that while digital tools offer valuable opportunities to learn and explore, these tools must be improved to better serve their best interests.

While the children reported that technology developers should design algorithms capable of filtering out harmful or inappropriate content, they also stressed their own responsibility in making careful choices about what they access online. A child in Brazil explained: *"You can find what you're looking for on the internet. The internet is a dangerous place, but it has its benefits, so much so that I use it a lot [describes good things he does on the internet]; but we need to rethink what we access on the internet"* (Brazil, 10–13 age group).

Many of the children expressed a clear demand for early education about digital technologies, not just early access to them. They want to understand how digital tools work, how they can benefit from them and how they can cause harm. Across all the countries, the children stressed the need for **digital literacy** before being given full access to digital technologies. As a child noted: *"It is very important to have more training and knowledge about digital technologies before owning a mobile phone or accessing the digital environment"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group).

Some children called for school curricula to include digital safety and for parents to enforce responsible online behaviour at home. A participant in India endorsed that view: *"Online safety should also be a part of the educational curriculum"* (India, MP, 14–17 age group). Many of the children also expressed the belief that **educating parents is essential** so that they understand both the tools their children use and the potential consequences of overreach. Specifically: *"Maybe give a class to parents when their kid turns a certain age about how they can keep an eye on what their children are doing"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group).

Education emerged as a consistent theme, not merely for academic learning, but as a foundation for digital resilience and critical awareness. Spanish adolescents noted that *"these issues should be discussed at school"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). In India, the children asked that schools *"help in giving digital and technical literacy"* (India, MP, 14–17 age group).

The participating children imagined a future for schools as **safe laboratories for digital citizenship** where children can learn about online rights, safety and responsibility in an environment of trust and guidance. They also viewed teachers as being key facilitators of digital empowerment, helping children to develop the skills and judgement needed to navigate the digital world safely and confidently.

# Wish 5. Ensure equity, accessibility and affordability of digital technologies

> *"[I wish] everyone can have access to the internet and equal rights."*
> *– Brazil, 14–17 age group*

Across most of the consultations, the children noted the importance of fair access and inclusion in the digital world. They expressed a strong desire for equal access to technology, the internet and apps, without excessive costs, advertisements and paywalls. For many, connectivity, affordability and inclusivity are not optional but fundamental components of their rights in the digital environment.

Overall, the children's concerns about inequality and the barriers they face when using digital technologies can be grouped into three main categories: (1) financial constraints and paywalls; (2) infrastructure and connectivity barriers; and (3) lack of inclusivity. The findings related to each of these categories are presented below.

## 5.1 Financial barriers and paywalls

The issue of paid content and paywalls emerged in almost every consultation. Echoing the issue of access to learning materials referenced above, the children described financial barriers that limit their ability to access games: *"Certain cool games I really want to play are for sale and can be very expensive for us."* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group). That also applied to educational materials: *"The learn[ing] apps that I can access are costly. I cannot pay the daily data expenses, so sometimes I am limited so that I can't continue with what I was learning"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group).

Economic barriers often restrict children's freedom to play or diminish their experience. Children from both high-income (e.g., USA, Spain) and low-income (e.g., Sierra Leone) contexts expressed frustration with costs, but the nature of the problem differed. In higher-income contexts the issue was expressed as one of **disruption**, as *"Pay restrictions can cause less play"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group), while in lower-income settings, the issue related more to **inaccessibility**.

The perceived 'unfairness' of paid games and apps emerged as a major theme in the role-play activities in the consultations. Feedback from children

across the seven countries revealed nuanced views on paid levels and in-game advertisements, centred on fairness, equity and inclusion. When asked to choose between paying for levels or watching advertisements to earn rewards, many highlighted the exclusionary impact of paywalls, particularly when essential game levels or perks were locked behind payment.

A dominant concern was the **sense of exclusion and social pressure** created by paid features, especially for children who cannot afford them: *"I think that just deters like people, especially younger children that know they can't pay for the game … it would just mean 'oh, I can't level up faster', compared to 'oh, I can't play the game anymore'"* (USA, 14–17 age group).

This dynamic is central to children's gaming experiences. While some children may accept slower progression (levelling up more slowly without paying), others are completely excluded from gameplay if certain levels are locked behind a paywall. A participant explained, *"It's also disappointing. Something I found with a Super Mario Run is that you can't beat the game unless you pay for the levels"* (USA, 10–13 age group).

Feelings of exclusion, and sometimes even shame, are amplified when friends buy seasonal passes or premium features. Some participants proposed potential solutions, such as more affordable subscription models to make costs manageable and reduce stigma. One suggested that, to *"maintain people's mental health, maybe it would be like a monthly payment, let's say, like two dollars or three dollars, which is not that much, and people don't have to work that hard to get to the next level"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

However, this suggestion came primarily from participants in the USA. Participants in low-income countries explained that even small fees may still exclude many children, especially when combined with high data costs and limited internet access.

Across these diverse backgrounds, the children's views point to a shared principle of fairness in access to games. Many of the participants said that paid levels create exclusion, and the social pressures tied to premium features can undermine self-esteem and social inclusion. While children generally dislike advertisements, many see non-intrusive, voluntary advertisements as a more equitable alternative to paywalls and an acceptable trade-off to ensure equal access to play. Some of the children

mentioned favouring models that allow everyone to enjoy the core game for free, with optional ways, such as watching advertisements or earning rewards, to enhance the experience.

## 5.2 Infrastructure and connectivity barriers

In some contexts, primarily in low- and middle-income countries, the participating children highlighted challenges related to digital infrastructure and connectivity.

Many reported not having the necessary devices, being unable to pay for data or broadband to access games, social media or learning materials, or living in areas where internet access is inconsistent or entirely unavailable.

Some explained that not owning a device limits their ability to participate online or express themselves: *"My parents do not provide me with a mobile phone, which prevents me from expressing my feelings"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group). Others noted that while they do not have their own devices, they occasionally use a parent's phone. This was particularly common in Malaysia and Sierra Leone where children described relying mainly on their mother's phones. As one child explained: *"I do not have a device like a phone or an iPad. I only use my parents' phones. They do not allow me to use certain applications on their phones. Well, I do not know why but I know it is to protect me."* (Sierra Leone 10–13 age group).

The children also pointed out the high cost of data and phone services, even in places where connectivity infrastructure has expanded. Indian participants, for example, described the financial strain of maintaining access despite broader network improvements: *"... but today, when 5G net is in place, then even in villages, the internet can be accessed easily. But the problem is that they do not have enough money to give phones to their children or to buy phones for themselves or they have to pay a lot of money for SIM recharges. Earlier, data was a little cheaper, but now it is costing a lot of money"* (India, MP, 14–17 age group). Children in Sierra Leone identified poor internet access and unreliable electricity as direct barriers to consistent digital learning: *"[barriers include] bad connections ... and most applications have usage limits"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group). This is in sharp contrast to the concerns raised in the USA and Spain, where the focus was more on information quality or excessive blocking, again highlighting the digital divide in both access and experience.

## 5.3 Inclusion and accessibility in digital technologies

The third major barrier to equity highlighted across several countries relates to language, child-unfriendly platform design and broader accessibility challenges.

In some contexts, the children raised concerns about the lack of local-language options on apps and platforms. This was especially prominent in India, where many children noted that the apps they use are available only in English, making it difficult to understand features, permissions and terms of use: *"Mainly I think there are two, firstly there is a lot of language problem[s], it is not available in simple language, most of the apps come to us in English, then we are not able to understand what permission is it asking for, what kind of permission, so sometimes we do not know"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group).

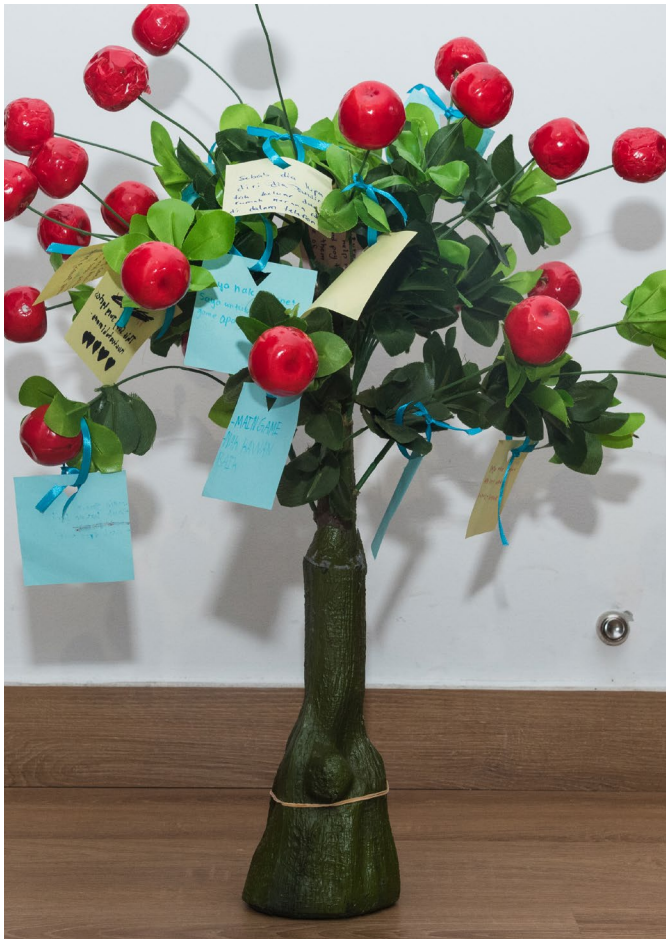

Photo from child consultations.

Beyond the language spoken, the participating children in almost all seven countries pointed to the lack of child-friendly wording on digital platforms. They described struggling with lengthy or complex terms and conditions, and many admitted having consented without fully understanding what they were agreeing to. According to the participants, *"Half of the people don't even read [the terms]. Even if you read it, you don't understand it"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group), and *"The fact is that nobody reads [the terms], it's there"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

Children with disabilities also reported being excluded from certain digital spaces. They noted that many platforms are not designed with their needs and best interests in mind. For example, the absence of subtitles makes videos inaccessible for deaf users, and some children requested features in local sign language: *"WhatsApp can be in Malaysian Sign Language, please"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group).

While gender did not emerge as a major barrier across all seven countries, it emerged as a strong and consistent concern in India. The children there stressed the need for better inclusion of girls in the digital world and for equal opportunities: *"Girls should be given participation and security in the digital world"* (India, MP, 10–13). They were also clear about where action is needed: *"I want to tell the government that just like it runs an institution for children, it should also run an institution for women, the families who forbid them from going out of the house, that family should be explained and what kind of rules should be made that if women have not studied till fifth or eighth, then they should be educated"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group).

The children also raised concerns about unfairness when only certain age groups are allowed access to specific platforms. This issue surfaced strongly in discussions about age-assurance systems, with the children feeling that restricting access based on age could deprive others of learning opportunities. As a participant in India explained: *"If it is made available only for the children of one age group, the others will be deprived of it. In that case, we will lose the freedom of learning"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group). They also noted the UNCRC *"defines anyone under 18 as a child, yet restricting app access to only 14–16-year-olds deprives other children of their right to learn"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group). A participant in Uganda clarified the issue: *"Age assurance may affect young children because their voices may not be heard"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group).

This sentiment of unfairness also came up strongly when children discussed bans of social media platforms for children under 16. While many acknowledged the risks associated with these platforms, including exposure to harmful content (such as manipulated or AI-generated videos), scams and bullying, most did not consider a complete ban to be in children's best interests. Instead, they emphasized that digital platforms also provide meaningful benefits such as learning, creativity, entertainment and social connection. Some children described blanket bans as disproportionate or unfair, arguing that access should not depend on age, but on maturity, and on how individuals use the platforms. For example, one participant commented: *"For me, the ban is extremist. … A 16-year-old child can have an interest in audiovisual, so why shouldn't they be able to use the tool?"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). Instead of broad prohibitions, children consistently suggested more targeted approaches, including appropriate age limits (there was no consensus on what the actual age threshold should be),

stronger safety features by tech companies, parental involvement and digital literacy education. As one participant summarized: *"Maybe to teach and raise awareness to children so that they self-manage the hours they are using their mobiles … It is better than banning."* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). Overall, this aligns with UNICEF's statement on social media age restrictions,[vi] which highlights the limitations of bans and proposes instead a holistic, proportionate and balanced approach to upholding children's rights. UNICEF calls on "governments, regulators, and companies to work with children and families to build digital environments that are safe, inclusive, and respect children's rights."

In summary, the children's experiences show that many digital products remain inaccessible or difficult to understand, leaving those who face language barriers, struggle with complex legal text or live with disabilities at a significant disadvantage. These experiences confirm that digital inequality is about not only access to devices or the internet but also recognition, inclusion and fairness in global technologies.

# Wish 6. Enhance play, creativity and self-expression opportunities

> *"I wish our voices can be heard on digital environments and we can succeed to show ourselves."*
> *– Uganda, 10–13 age group*

Across the seven countries represented, the participating children repeatedly expressed a clear wish for digital spaces that would allow them to play, create and express themselves – the importance of which was evident in the children's discussion of equity and accessibility. They want online environments that foster creativity and allow their voices to be heard. The children's reflections illustrate how deeply intertwined digital play and expression are with their rights to participate, play, form identity and be protected from harm.

## 6.1 Digital play, joy and learning

The children described digital play as a source of joy, social connection and comfort. Many spoke about how games and online entertainment help them to unwind after school, take their mind off homework or simply have fun. The findings show that online games offer them a way to decompress and focus their minds: *"Games really ease stress and help me to interact with others in different parts of the world"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group).

Beyond entertainment, digital environments often provide a gateway to friendship and community: *"I have always used digital platforms to play games. Like, play these online games, because I normally make friends there. I normally socialize"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group). These connections are not limited by distance. Some children described forming long-distance friendships online through games and social media. For example: *"although he is so far away, we have never seen each other, nor do we know each other, but as game members, we both are very close to each other, even though we do not know who each other is. Still, we have become friends"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group).

Digital platforms have also expanded the kinds of games and play experiences available to children, even introducing them to new cultures and ways of playing. This access fosters intercultural learning and breaks down geographic barriers to play: *"During the pandemic lockdown, it allowed us to learn about games from other parts of the world, for example, the physical education teacher showed us games from Thailand"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

## 6.2 Online-offline balance in children's lives

While children value digital play, many of the participants noted being aware of the dangers of spending too much time online. They described how excessive gaming can reduce motivation to engage in real-life activities, particularly physical play or spending time with friends. Three comments from participants clarified this issue: *"If you stay playing at home you don't go out to play football with your friends"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group), *"Playing online games can make you not want to play outside"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group) and *"You are too busy online and forget to hang out in real life"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

However, adolescents, particularly in the USA and Malaysia, also noted that social media platforms can help them to organize offline play, strengthening the interplay between digital and physical worlds: *"You can use social media to schedule time to hang out"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

Conflicts between digital play and responsibilities were also mentioned in the consultations. The children described moments of tension at home or school when they prioritized online entertainment over homework or chores. As an adolescent in Malaysia noted, *"My mom asked me to wash clothes, but I'm playing games"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group). Similarly, children in India described losing track of time and neglecting responsibilities, while children in Uganda admitted thinking about games during class and being distracted from their schoolwork.

Despite these challenges, many of the children argued that balance is both necessary and achievable. "*We can play games to entertain us, but we need to know when to stop"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

They also reported worrying about manipulative design features encouraging them and their peers to spend more time online. As one child noted, *"I'm concerned for my peers … because he'd be spending a lot of time on like [sports betting apps]"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group). Others described how streaming platforms can consume an entire day: *"You want to finish the whole season"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group). Many called for platform features to support balanced use, such as an *"Automatic limit on screen time"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

## 6.3 Expression, identity and self-representation

For many children, digital technology is as much about expressing who they are as it is about playing. The participants frequently described platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and messaging apps as creative outlets that provide spaces where emotions, talents and opinions can be shared freely: *"I love digital tech because it helps me express and let my emotions free. For example, if I message, I can use an emoji to express myself"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Creativity is central to how many children express themselves online. The participating children spoke about posting songs, dances, drawings and videos. Across countries and age groups, the children reported using digital spaces to shape how they want to be seen, by selecting usernames, avatars, emojis, profile pictures and bios that reflect their personality, interests or cultural background: *"I would identify myself with a nickname I like and avatars, it's how I would like to be seen"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group).

Personal interests are especially important for their self-expression. Children commonly express themselves by sharing content about things they enjoy, such as music, pets, fashion, food and creative arts. This pattern emerged consistently across countries. As one child reported, *"I'm in groups about art and poetry, and we share different ideas and thoughts"* (Brazil, 10–13 age group).

The children also described using the internet to celebrate and learn about their cultural roots, particularly in contexts where their identities may not be fully accepted offline: *"You can post stuff about your culture … people will be like encouraging about it. That could make you express who you want to be even more"* (USA, 10–13 age group).

Such positive feedback online can play a meaningful role in building confidence. The children said that receiving supportive comments or engagement helped them to feel more secure in who they are, reinforcing the idea that safe digital spaces can nurture identity development: *"People can give you more confidence to be yourself by commenting encouraging and kind words"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group). However, the opposite is equally true. Some of the children mentioned that negative comments online can make it harder for them to express their identities, often leading to them staying silent or even disconnecting from the platform altogether.

## 6.4 Pressures on authentic identity

While digital spaces enable rich forms of expression, the children also recognized that they can come with pressure to perform or distort identity. Some of the participants mentioned feeling compelled to hide aspects of themselves for safety or acceptance: *"Try to, like, fit in with certain groups. You might want to not, like, be like your true self, if you're trying to be in a certain group"* (USA, Atlanta, 10–13 years old).

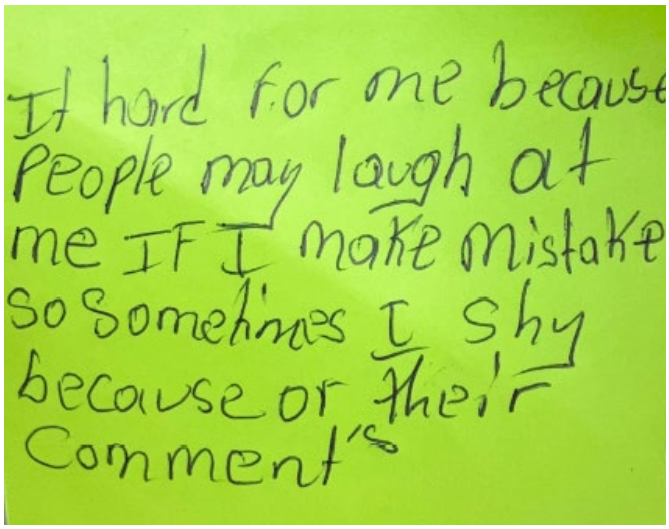


Photo from child consultations.

Social media, photo and video filters, and curated aesthetics can further blur the line between authenticity and performance. A younger child noted, *"The filters can be used to change ourselves until our faces don't [look] like our own"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group). Adolescents expressed similar concerns: *"We often lose our identity because we want to live what others live as if it were the 'perfect' life. A fake life"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

Overall, the children clearly indicated their view that digital technologies allow them to express their identities in dynamic, customizable and empowering ways. At the same time, they are acutely aware of the pressures to conform and the features that can intensify those pressures.

# Wish 7. Support physical and mental health and well-being in the digital world

> *"[I wish] that children are not hooked to phones."*
> *– Spain, Madrid 14–17 age group*

Across all countries and age groups, the children recognized that health and well-being sit at the heart of their best interests in digital life. They want technologies that help them feel safe, supported and strong, physically, mentally and emotionally, not tools that undermine their confidence, well-being or sense of self. While they see clear potential for digital tools to improve health and safety, they also warned of growing risks when technologies are unregulated, overwhelming or misleading.

## 7.1 Mental and emotional health

The children consistently described their digital experiences as both a **source of comfort and connection** and a **cause of stress and anxiety**. Digital platforms help many to cope with difficult emotions, express themselves creatively and find supportive communities. The children mentioned that streaming music, videos and online discussions often provide relief, inspiration and confidence: *"Listening to music makes me feel less pressure … it gives me the time to think about things I wanna do"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group).

However, the children also expressed awareness that these same spaces can **intensify emotional distress**. Constant exposure to unrealistic images, harmful content and social comparison fuels anxiety, stress and sometimes sadness. Older adolescents in particular described online pressures that affect self-esteem and mental balance: *"You get stressed because you look at things that don't do you any good"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

The participants called for digital environments that actively protect mental health by limiting harmful content, promoting positive communities and teaching coping strategies as part of digital literacy. They want to feel empowered in digital spaces, not overwhelmed by them.

## 7.2 Digital technology use and its effects on physical health

Much like their reflections on mental health, the participants associated digital technologies both with opportunities to live healthier lives and risks to their physical well-being. On a positive note, many of them noted their appreciation for digital platforms that **promote exercise, healthier nutrition and fitness**. Videos, apps and online challenges inspire healthy habits and offer accessible exercise tutorials: *"There are some apps that help with fitness"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

**Physical strain from excessive screen time** is a universal concern. Across all contexts, the children mentioned eye strain, back pain, fatigue and disrupted sleep as common consequences of digital overuse: *"Looking at the phone at night causes eye problems"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group).

They also associated excessive screen time with **neglecting basic needs** such as eating, sleeping and staying active. Several noted that they or their peers sometimes skip meals, lose sleep or fall behind on homework due to spending too much time on social media or gaming. As a child in the USA warned, *"Online games can be fun but also they can stop you from thinking about your needs: food, water, sleep"* (USA, 10–13 age group).

The children's reflections make clear that balancing online engagement and physical health is essential to ensuring that technology supports, rather than undermines, their right to a healthy life. They see a need for policies and platform features that help to maintain this balance.

## 7.3 Digital technologies as sources of health information and safety guidance

Children are increasingly using the internet to access health information, learn about their bodies and prepare for emergencies. Across the world, the participants recognized digital technology as a valuable source of **health knowledge, safety alerts and self-care guidance** that makes it *"Easy to find solutions to health problems … [I] can search up health tips"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group) and provides a method of *"Getting information about floods, tsunamis on TV and through phones"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group).

They also report using digital tools to learn about hygiene, healthy eating and disease prevention, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic: *"The internet gives us a place to get information about healthy habits"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group).

Some of the children reported relying on the internet for medical advice and health-related information, but they also recognized that not everything they find online is accurate. As one participant explained, *"... they tell you that eat this food and you'll be this. And yet sometimes it's a lie. So maybe on some side, it gives you true information that improves your health. And sometimes it can lead to your death"* (Uganda, 14–17 age group).

For children, digital technologies play an important role in accessing health information and receiving safety updates in emergencies. This makes it essential for them to be able to recognize reliable sources and critically assess online advice. While many of the children described themselves as having some ability to judge whether information is trustworthy, they acknowledged that support is still needed for them to distinguish reliable guidance from false or harmful content, combined with measures to prevent harmful content appearing in the first place.

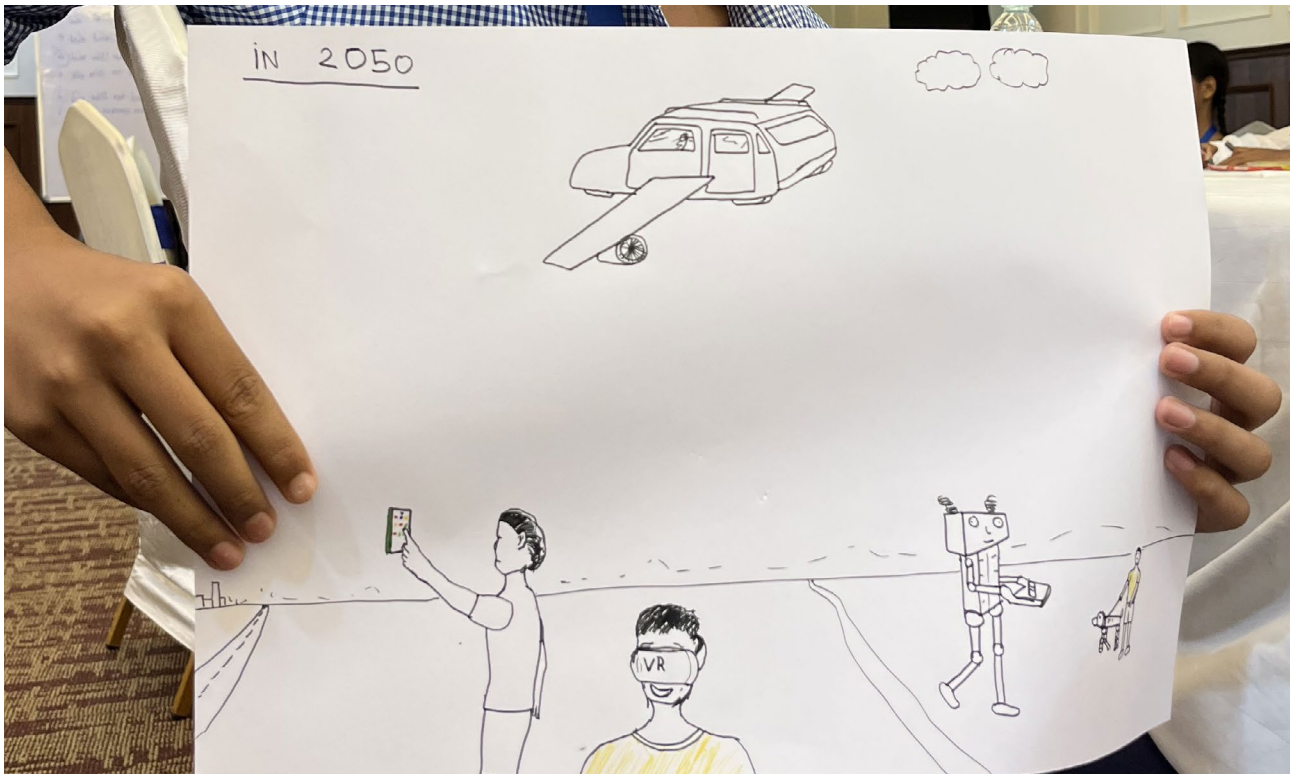


Photo from child consultations.

# Digital design features that support children's best interests

## Wish 8. Create features that are smarter, not stricter

> *"I would like everything to be reliable, for us to feel safer and more comfortable using the applications."*
> *- Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group*

While earlier sections of this report examined the broader changes needed to align the digital environment with children's best interests, this section focuses on the platform features designed to protect children. It is structured in three parts. First, it provides an overview of how the participants reported their perceptions of common platform safety features. Second, it outlines the changes those children stated are needed to improve these features. Third, it explores what the children said they want from online safety features more broadly.

Across the consultation groups, children expressed growing concerns about excessive device use, manipulative design practices and exposure to harmful content. Although they recognized the intentions behind safety features such as parental controls, content filters and time limits, they were often critical of how these measures are implemented, describing them as insufficient, ineffective or easy to circumvent. Rather than simply imposing stricter rules, the children emphasized the need for smarter and more effective safeguards. Importantly, the discussions did not centre on specific platforms or apps. Instead, the children reflected on safety features through hypothetical scenarios involving imagined platforms or websites, with some also drawing examples from their lives and the platforms they use. This approach enabled them to think more freely and analytically about digital safety, offering clear insights into what they believe works and how features could be redesigned to better serve their needs.

## 8.1 Children's experiences with common digital design features

### Age assurance systems

Age assurance[vii] refers to the various methods that online services use to determine a user's age with some degree of confidence. Across countries and age groups, the children demonstrated awareness of these systems and the tools designed to maintain age-appropriate online spaces and content. Many of them voiced support for the idea in principle, particularly the younger children, who reported viewing age checks as a form of protection: *"Age assurance, it helps children watch things [appropriate for] their age"* (Uganda, 10–13 age group). However, while the need for age assurance was widely accepted, the approach to implementation was met with significant scepticism. The children repeatedly mentioned that the concept only works in theory, as age assurance systems are easy to bypass, and they reported often doing so themselves. Adjusting a birth year and inventing a false identity were described as routine workarounds. As one child put it: *"If you enter the wrong date of birth then how do they know that we entered it wrong"* (India, MP, 14–17 age group).

With this widespread firsthand experience, many of the children see age assurance less as a meaningful safeguard and more as a well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective digital formality.

## Parental supervision tools

Children are not a homogeneous group with a single opinion; this became particularly evident in discussions about parental supervision tools. The participants' opinions varied widely, not only between countries but also within age groups, and even depending on the platforms they use. While some of the children reported being comfortable with their parents having a degree of oversight, others strongly opposed it.

Across consultations, many children, particularly the younger ones, acknowledged some level of parental supervision to be necessary, especially to shield children from harmful content or risky interactions: *"Yes, I think it [parental supervision] is in our best interest because the child does not know what to do by themselves and needs guidance. The parents ensure that their child is safe from anything bad on the app"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

Older children, however, expressed more nuanced attitudes. Some of the adolescents expressed a strong desire for privacy, even while recognizing the importance of safety. For them, the issue was less about the idea of supervision itself and more about how it is implemented. As they explained, *"Even if you are a child, you also have the right to privacy, and it is being violated"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Attitudes also **differed by platform**. The children were generally more comfortable with parental supervision in online games, particularly around issues such as screen time and preventing exposure to harmful language, *"Because these games … there might be the use of obscene language"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group). In contrast, social media was often described as personal and private; a space where supervision felt invasive: *"Parental supervision is not always in a child's best interest, as it can restrict freedom of speech and self-expression"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

One theme that emerged consistently throughout the discussions was the central role of **trust** in the relationship between children and their parents or caregivers. Children repeatedly stressed that monitoring without trust can backfire, damaging relationships and driving children towards secrecy. An adolescent noted: *"I think [a parental supervision tool] should have to have, like, consent from both people"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group). This suggests that children believe that supervision must come from a place of relationship, dialogue and mutual respect, not just control.

The consultation in Atlanta surfaced an ethical issue that many children recognized: What happens when parents coerce consent by threatening to remove access? This introduces a power imbalance that can lead to mistrust, as *"The parents will say, 'If you say no, I'll just take your phone"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group).

Beyond relational issues, the children explained that existing parental control tools often feel like blunt instruments lacking nuance, as they do not distinguish between intentional, productive digital use (e.g., researching a school topic or homework) and passive or distracting behaviour (e.g., scrolling on social media): *"It is not the same to be looking at Instagram all day as it is to be looking at a book. Parental control apps do not differentiate"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Another concern was that platforms often assume that parents or caregivers are always involved in their children's digital lives, but this **overreliance on parental supervision** is seen to be a flaw. As some of the participants pointed out, not all children have active parental or caregiver support, and they questioned how safety features could work for those without such oversight. They stressed that safety features must work regardless of a child's home situation: *"What about orphans?"* (USA, Atlanta, 10–13 age group). This highlights the need for systemic, built-in safety features that function independently of parental oversight and work for all children, regardless of their home situation.

The children's attitudes towards parental supervision were rarely absolute. While many found it frustrating or intrusive, they also recognized its value, particularly when applied in a fair, transparent and age-appropriate way. As a child in Brazil noted, *"There are many people who think that parental supervision is a bad thing, but it also has its positive points"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

### Content filtering mechanisms

The children across all countries generally supported content filters as a way of protecting them from harmful or inappropriate content, particularly at younger ages. Indeed, the younger children (10–13 age groups) consistently expressed a need for protection, emphasizing the importance of having measures in place to remove harmful or inappropriate materials: *"Content moderation is good for kids under 17, so they don't end up seeing what shouldn't be seen [inappropriate content]"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group).

As children grow older, however, their views become more critical. Among adolescents aged 14 to 17, particularly in Brazil, Sierra Leone and the USA, the concern shifted towards overreach, such as filters blocking not only inappropriate content but also necessary or useful information, including mental health or sexual and reproductive health information: *"You're taking away certain information from your world"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

Despite these concerns, there is broad agreement that well-designed content filters can play a positive role in safeguarding mental and emotional well-being. Exposure to violent, disturbing or inappropriate sexual content was a recurring concern across all age groups, with many of the children associating such material with trauma, anxiety or confusion about their identity. In Malaysia and Brazil, the participants voiced particularly strong concerns about how digital content can influence personal identity. As one child explained, *"It [a content filter] helps helps protect the child's identity because it [online content] can influence the child's identity"* (Malaysia, 10–13 age group).

Ultimately, the children recognized the value of content filters, but they want to ensure these tools are not overly restrictive. They want protections that shield them from genuinely harmful material while still allowing access to important, age-appropriate information, especially as they move into adolescence. Involving children directly in discussions around how to find this balance is recommended.

### Recommendation algorithms

Across the represented countries, the participating children generally recognized the value of recommendation tools, particularly those which personalize content to match the user's interests, help them to discover new topics and filter out irrelevant material: *"Yes, because this way you can see only content that you are interested in"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group). They also explained that, *"It affects learning by providing recommendations for apps to expand your knowledge. So yes, they are in our best interest"* (Sierra Leone, 10–13 age group).

For younger children, the ability to personalize and explore content was seen as a clear benefit, but they had doubts: *"Yes, it is positive because you get content that interests you, but the negative is that you keep seeing content that you no longer want to see*" (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group). Those doubts grew for the older children (14–17 age group), who expressed views

that are even more cautious. They still valued personalization, but their concerns had shifted towards privacy risks, overexposure and the lack of control over what is recommended. A common frustration expressed was that once a recommendation system understands a preference, it continues to push the same type of content, even after interest has waned. Adolescents in Brazil, Spain and Sierra Leone expressed irritation with algorithms that fail to adapt quickly to changing interests and that continue pushing content children no longer find engaging. One participant described this as: *"A very annoying thing, if I like a video, 300 will appear. It's really annoying!"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). If continuous, it may also reduce the diversity of content and perspectives children are exposed to.

Beyond frustration with repetitive content, many of the children noted the manipulative design of some recommendation systems that encourage excessive engagement and screen time. The children, especially those in the USA 10–13 age group, were highly aware of how recommendations can drive prolonged usage. This concern was echoed in Spain, where some participants called for intervention tools such as break reminders or 'time for a break' alerts: *"The recommendations could also be a con, because it could keep you on the app"* (USA, Atlanta, 10–13 age group).

Another concern, which was particularly raised by the children in India, related to repeated exposure to advertisements. They described how constant advertising can lead to unnecessary purchases: *"So, as it happens, we get ads, we see something, it means it is not of any use to us, but it looks good, but after forcing it repeatedly, it looks good, it must be good too, but its quality is not that good, then we order it, if we see it repeatedly"* (India, MP, 14–17 age group). This reflects a broader feeling among the children that repetitive advertisements are manipulative, push products they do not need and carry stark financial consequences.

In addition to concerns about advertisements and overexposure, some of the children also mentioned failures of recommendation tools, such as being shown inappropriate, shocking or irrelevant contents. One child described how the recommendation tool led hher to find *"songs that have obscene language"* (Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group).

The children expressed a clear desire for more intelligent, dynamic algorithms that adapt over time rather than systems that push repetitive, irrelevant or inappropriate content.

## 8.2 Trust and flexibility in safety features

While the children were not fundamentally opposed to common digital safety tools, as presented above, they expressed a belief that these features need significant improvement to function more effectively and be harder to bypass. Age assurance was a particular focus. Despite their scepticism, many of the participants proposed ways to strengthen these systems, including approaches similar to those used in adult-only environments, such as ID-based verification. An adolescent noted, *"If you wanted to go to like a casino, you'd have to put in your ID, I think it should probably be the same way"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group).

However, many participants, especially older adolescents, had strong reservations towards ID-based verifications, especially around privacy and safety concerns: *"It's like an invasion of privacy"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group). This tension reveals a key challenge: Children want stronger protections, yet they fear that more stringent age checks could compromise their privacy or create new risks. As a participant noted: *"It should be possible to verify the age … but in a safe way, and the most personal data should be hidden"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group).

### Trust as a foundation for digital safety

A consistent and powerful theme that emerged across multiple consultations was the central **role of trust**. For the children, particularly the adolescents, trust was not a peripheral concern; it was recognized as being fundamental to their willingness to engage with the features discussed here. When trust is lacking, whether towards parents or technology companies, children quickly find ways to circumvent the tools intended to protect them.

The adolescents often expressed frustration or cynicism about monitoring tools, openly describing how they bypass or fool parental control systems. This pattern was much less evident among younger children (aged 10–13), who, while acknowledging the importance of trust, did not discuss in detail ways to overcome protection mechanisms when trust is lacking. As one adolescent mentioned: *"You can also just create another email for your parents. You can just be your own parent"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group). They also demonstrated increasing sophistication in evading content filters. For example, adolescents in Atlanta described how they misspell words or use symbols instead of letters to manipulate the system: *"They can get around it pretty easily, like, misspelling words … like an exclamation point (!) instead of an 'I'"* (USA, Atlanta, 14–17 age group). These examples reveal not only a lack of

trust in the systems but also a clear understanding of their limitations and vulnerabilities.

Trust concerns extended beyond parental controls to the broader digital environment, particularly the companies behind the platforms that children use. In consultations, the children raised strong concerns about privacy and data security, questioning whether their information was being misused or exploited for commercial purposes: *"It is good as long as the information is not shared later, and that you are not forced to buy something"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

These worries intensified when discussing platforms that use recommendation algorithms, which many of the children viewed as potential threats to their privacy. Adolescents in Spain and Malaysia articulated nuanced concerns about surveillance, commercial motives and safety, especially in connection to advertising and exposure to inappropriate content. In Sierra Leone, while some of the adolescents saw recommendations as identity-affirming, others were wary of disturbing or mentally uncomfortable content.

Privacy concerns were particularly pronounced in India, where some children felt that recommendations appeared to reflect their real-world conversation. As some earlier examples also noted, *"Content filters are in our best interest, but recommendation tools are not, as they compromise privacy"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group). Some expressed wider concerns in this area: *"... one thing I notice is that whenever we keep a phone nearby during a conversation, the very topics we talk about start showing up as recommendations. In this way, our privacy is being affected, because our views and conversations are being tracked. I feel that our privacy is being misused"* (India, Assam, 14–17 age group).

Ultimately, the consultations surfaced a crucial insight: without trust, no digital safety or monitoring tools will be effective. Trust is essential not only in the children's relationships with parents and caregivers but also in how they perceive technology companies and the handling of their personal data. As the consultation findings clearly demonstrate, when children do not trust these systems or feel that their privacy is being compromised, they are more likely to bypass safeguards or dismiss the recommendations offered. Further, even when trust in systems is limited, children's desire to access systems and participate in digital spaces remains a powerful motivator. This reveals an

important tension: children seek trustworthy environments yet may continue to engage with systems they do not fully trust. Addressing this gap requires not only stronger safeguards, but also greater transparency, accountability and meaningful engagement with children to build and sustain trust over time.

### Children's evolving capacities

Another central theme in discussions about digital safety was the **evolving capacities** of children and their ability to manage their online lives. Across the consultations, many of the children argued that their digital maturity does not always align with strict age limits and questioned whether existing age thresholds are truly reflective of their capabilities in the digital world. As a participant in Sierra Leone noted: *"Children nowadays have phones as early as 12 … I think the age bracket should be reduced"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group).

This sentiment reflects a broader critique of one-size-fits-all age restrictions that fail to account for the nuances of individual development. The children recognized that their ability to navigate the digital landscape is shaped not only by age but also by experience, context, digital literacy and the types of content they engage with.

Regardless of whether they were aged 10 or 17, many participants felt confident in managing their own online safety while acknowledging that younger children still require more protection. As one child put it when discussing tools such as age assurance and content filters: *"It doesn't respect boundaries for older children but is good for younger children"* (Malaysia, Sabah, 10–13 age group).

These reflections reveal a broader understanding of development: Children do not want to be treated as incapable, especially as they gain more digital experience. They seek gradual independence – a 'training wheels' approach in which parental controls loosen as maturity increases. In line with this, some of the children proposed middle-ground solutions, such as requiring parental or caregiver approval for specific actions rather than constant monitoring: *"Maybe like before you purchase something, they [parents or caregivers] have to confirm it"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group). Another participant reflected: *"I think with a couple of changes to the way parents are interacting with the kids on the app I think it would make it better and I think it would be in the kid's best interest … like the kid doesn't have to do anything to let the parent set up the account but then also the parent can't see like who you follow*

*like what stuff you like what you say, but they can … just like see your screen time and how much time you spend on the app to make sure that you're not spending a lot of time"* (USA, Georgia, 14–17 age group).

In the discussions around age assurance, some of the participants proposed integrating **age verification with parental controls** for added security. Some suggested the possibility of strengthening both oversight and age checks by requiring a parent or guardian to verify their contact information: *"Parental controls: It is more difficult to pretend to be an adult, for example, if the site requires you to validate your father's mobile phone"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). Others explained how an adult's legal ID could be used to enhance security: *"parental controls could be tied into the age verification, … to play the thing, you have to enter your age first and then you need a parent's like legal ID or something like …"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

Ultimately, the theme of evolving capacities indicates that children's needs and abilities are not static. As they grow, their abilities to navigate digital spaces also evolve, and so too should the tools and strategies designed to protect them.

## 8.3 Children's priorities for smarter safety features

When the consulted children were asked what could help protect them online (beyond the commonly implemented approaches), they responded with insight, creativity and a desire for solutions balancing safety with freedom. Across countries and age groups, the children were clear about wanting to be safe online, but not through blunt, restrictive or invasive controls. Instead, they called for thoughtful, inclusive and intelligent tools that genuinely protect without undermining children's freedom, privacy or dignity.

### Customization and user control

Perhaps the most consistent demand from the adolescents was for control over what they see and how they engage with digital platforms. They do not want content filters to be removed; they want them to evolve. The adolescents in Sierra Leone and the USA envisioned systems where users would be able to adjust the level and type of filtering based on their needs: *"The content should be filtered according to your age … and interest …"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group).

Across all the age groups, the children expressed a desire for content filters going beyond simple keyword blocking. They want tools capable of recognizing more complex forms of harmful behaviour, such as violent content or behaviour, inappropriate language and toxic interactions, while adapting to their age and the context of their online experiences. One participant in Spain suggested, *"A filter that corrects the use of words and bad language and makes it impossible to upload any kind of violence"* (Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group). Another participant said, *"Maybe professional fact-checkers should be involved in filtering content … On TikTok, for example, you may not see certain parts of the body and the AI does not pick it up correctly because it doesn't see it well. But this can be perfected with human verifiers who have more sensitivity"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Some of the children also advocated for the broader application of filtering systems beyond just blocking explicit material. As comment sections and recommendation algorithms can expose children to toxic or harmful content, even when the main platform experience is filtered, they want tools that address these spaces: *"I think we should also be, like, something that filters out, like, comments … maybe decreases the number"* (USA, 14–17 age group).

### Safety by design

A request from some of the children was the creation of separate, age-appropriate versions of apps, but they noted that: *"The application should have a version for children … Age filters often fail, especially if made by AI or not adapted to the age indicated"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). As different age groups require different kinds of digital experiences, *"I would want to like maybe make two different apps: one for like 16 and older and one for younger people. So that they can still have fun on it, but they won't feel anxious"* (USA, California, 10–13 age group). Purpose-built platforms and apps for children, rather than retrofitting the adult versions, were seen as a way to reduce the risk of exposure to inappropriate content and contact while better supporting their evolving digital maturity: *"Make a separate app which is for children"* (India, MP, 10–13 age group).

When discussing age assurance, several children raised concerns about a double standard: Websites and platforms often have safeguards to keep children out of adult spaces, but not the other way around. In the children's view, adult access to child-oriented platforms remains dangerously open, as a participant in Spain explained: *"On websites for children, adults can access, and there are no restrictions; only in those websites for adults there is more security"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

This reflects a deeper anxiety: Children worry about not only their own inappropriate access to adult spaces but also adult intrusion into their online environments, particularly in unmoderated or poorly protected apps.

Creating child-only versions of platforms would allow companies to design environments that genuinely match children's developmental needs through safer, more supportive and more enjoyable spaces tailored to the realities of childhood and adolescence.

### Time limits and healthy usage patterns

Many of the participants reported viewing time limits as a useful way of promoting balance, but they want them to be flexible and non-punitive. Instead of having hard cut-offs, the children expressed a preference for gentle reminders that would help them to manage their time without completely restricting access. Several also mentioned features such as automatic brightness adjustments to reduce eye strain during extended screen use. A participant in Spain suggested: *"On Instagram, after 1 hour, a reminder could pop up, but without blocking it completely"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). Some children asked for more hard cut-offs and stricter time-limits: *"Add time limits, so children can also study and play offline"* (Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group).

These ideas reflect children's growing awareness of their own screen habits and their desire for tools that support healthier, more balanced digital use.

## Active warnings about harmful content

The children also discussed in the consultations how they want more proactive and reliable content warnings, especially on video-sharing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, where violent and disturbing content can often appear unexpectedly: *"Instagram has content warnings, but they're not good enough. Sometimes it says it's a video of a cat, and it's not. There should be levels of warning – like 'you do not want to see this'"* (USA, California, 14–17 age group). They stressed the need for those warnings to be clear and accurate to enable informed decisions before children engage with potentially harmful material: *"That, when you access, a caution alert comes up. That you don't have to enter directly, i.e., that a warning pops up and you can say: 'okay, safety'"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group).

Despite the existing mechanisms, many of the children reported still encountering inappropriate, violent or disturbing content because warning systems failed to flag it. This led them to call for better, more reliable filters and warning systems that are more effective in protecting children from harmful content.

## Children's participation in design processes

One of the most powerful insights from the consultations was the children's desire to be meaningfully involved in shaping platforms and the safety features they use. They do not want protections simply designed for them; they want to co-create the digital spaces they inhabit. This sense of ownership came through clearly in calls for platforms to be designed by more diverse teams, including young people themselves: *"We want to participate safely. The idea is that we make the app together. So children participate too"* (Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group). Another child suggested: *"Not just programmers or businesspeople. Bring in psychologists, lawyers … you're forming your world from a diversity to a diversity"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group).

Involving children in the design process would not only empower them but also ensure that platforms and safety tools are more closely aligned with their real needs, lived experiences and concerns.

## Legal and community accountability

Finally, the children stated that platforms should take more responsibility for harmful content and behaviour. They want stronger legal mechanisms for holding platforms accountable when children are exposed to harmful or inappropriate content. As one participant explained: *"If someone posts something malicious, the platform owner should take action – even before it goes viral or causes damage"* (Brazil, 14–17 age group). It is important to recognize that there is no universally agreed definition of harmful content, and imprecise or overly broad rules may undermine children's rights, including their rights to freedom of expression and access to information. UNICEF's policy brief on online platform regulation adds depth around the importance of regulating harmful content.[viii]

Children also expressed frustration with inconsistent enforcement of platform rules and called for clearer, stronger consequences for users who repeatedly break platform rules. These calls collectively reflect children's growing frustration with platforms that fail to act swiftly and decisively against harmful content and behaviour. The consultations revealed children's desire for digital environments where accountability is taken seriously, with responsibility shared by platforms, communities and legal systems.

# Children's ideas on how to create digital environments in their best interests

As a prelude to the broad report recommendations, this section summarizes some of the ideas and solutions shared specifically by the children on how digital technologies could better serve their best interests. Although the consultations were not designed to task children with solving complex, global digital challenges, many participants offered thoughtful and creative suggestions. Some of these ideas are already highlighted in blue throughout the report, while the additional examples presented here provide further insight into the challenges children experience and how they believe these issues could be addressed.

The ideas presented here are organized thematically and range from practical, immediately implementable improvements (some of which may already exist in certain contexts) to more innovative and forward-looking proposals. While some suggestions may not be technically feasible, or will need adaptation to be fully rights-respecting, together they highlight both the everyday realities children navigate online and their aspirations for safer, more supportive digital environments.

## Age appropriate content filtering

*"Let's say a kid gets an iPhone and while they're setting their iPhone, you choose the age. So, and based on this, the technology only allow you to download something you're interested [in]. So you download your age, you download your interests. And you can only have access to this content."* – USA, California, 14–17 age group

*"the AI detects whether you are 16, and therefore show you images or not."* – Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group

## Strengthening oversight and accountability in digital spaces

*"We could come together as a community and take a vote on the safety of social media."* – USA, California, 14–17 age group

*"Just like there are parent organizations for school (PFO) they should create something like that for media."* – USA, California, 10–13 age group

*"The government should ban advertisements [in games]."* – India, MP, 14–17 age group

## Digital literacy and education

*"The government should conduct awareness programs for digital usage."* – India, MP, 14–17 age group

*"it is very important to have more training and knowledge about digital technologies before owning a mobile phone or accessing the digital environment. Like an exam to gain access."* – Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group

*"It could be argued that it is necessary to take a test to have a mobile phone, like the one to be able to drive."* – Spain, Castrillón, 10–13 age group

*"I liked the idea of how to educate with technology, to know which pages are reliable, which are not … how to use a tablet and a mobile phone; without knowing how, it can harm us or not. These issues should be discussed at school."* – Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group

*"Children should be trained about the app and use should not be allowed without training. Safety orientation should be added to the app."* – India, MP, 14–17 age group

*"Awareness about the responsible use of social media must be spread by the UN or other international organizations to prevent the current issues."* – India, Assam, 14–17 age group

## Privacy and personal data protection

*"And I would probably also have it so like at the start of the app they would scan your face and then select the photos from your camera that are like your face and those are the only ones you can use instead of being able to use anybody."* – USA, Georgia, 14–17 age group

## Inclusion and equitable access to digital technologies

*"Government should give unlimited data."* – Malaysia, Johor, 14–17 age group

*"A lot of things you want to do on the internet [courses, games, movies] you have to pay for, everything is becoming premium. You pay an absurd amount to have access for a month and then you have to pay. Everyone has Spotify Premium and I have no money. Access has to be free."* – Brazil, 14–17 age group

*"What about language? Like people who do not know how to read. When you are playing the game there will be tools that can read for you … Yes the game can have [an] audio tool that reads for you."* – Sierra Leone, 14–17 age group

## Time limits

*"[A] time limit should be set for games on the app, so that after that time the game closes automatically, the child will leave the mobile himself."* – India, MP, 14–17 age group

*"On my mobile, it pops up that you have been using it for 1:30 hours, and I become aware that, for example, I have spent 2 hours watching an application and then I myself leave."* – Spain, Madrid, 14–17 age group

## Uses of AI

*"[In the future there will be] an application with artificial intelligence [that] will help you like a psychologist."* – Spain, 10–13 age group

# Recommendations for creating digital environments in children's best interests

The recommendations below present actionable measures for governments, including policymakers and regulators, and technology companies to help translate children's wishes into technology design and company business models. The recommendations were informed by the needs, concerns and priorities expressed by children throughout the consultations. They were further elaborated through co-development with the Youth Network in July 2025 and expert consultations conducted in September 2025.

### 1. Ensure age-appropriate, accessible digital product and service communication

**Governments should** require that terms of service, privacy notices and consent mechanisms be presented in genuinely clear, age-appropriate and accessible formats. Guidance and standards for implementation should be developed.

**Technology companies should:**

- Redesign user interfaces and terms and conditions so that children can easily understand platform practices, give informed consent to platform terms and withdraw consent when needed. This would include the use of simple, age-appropriate language tailored to different literacy levels, as well as visual clues, interactive explanations and other child-friendly formats, instead of dense legal texts.
- Implement proactive, standardized content warnings with clear, descriptive levels of alert (e.g., "the following [video/post/photo] contains content that you may find upsetting") rather than vague or inconsistent flags, helping children to make informed choices before engaging with potentially harmful content.

## 2. Address risks associated with AI and emerging technologies

**Governments should** explicitly integrate children's rights into AI governance frameworks and ensure that judicial and regulatory systems are equipped to respond to AI-enabled harms. This would include clear accountability and remedy pathways for when AI systems expose children to risk, and robust data governance mechanisms to ensure children's rights are upheld by platforms.[ix]

**Technology companies should:**

- Increase algorithmic transparency, helping children to understand why certain content is recommended and how to reset or adjust recommendation systems when they push repetitive, intrusive or harmful content. This should include clear, age-appropriate explanations of how children's personal data are processed, for example through child-friendly privacy notices that reflect their age and evolving capacities.
- Conduct or support ongoing assessments of AI's impact on children (see recommendation 7 below), including effects on development, critical thinking, autonomy, dependency and privacy, ensuring that emerging technologies evolve in ways that support children's well-being.
- Implement clear labelling of AI-generated content, enabling children to distinguish between human-created and machine-generated content.
- Strengthen safeguards for detecting and removing harmful content or behaviour, using privacy-respecting, pre-detection tools. AI filters should be complemented by human verifiers and professional fact-checkers, as automated systems often fail to identify contextual or nuanced harms.

## 3. Create digital platforms that support health and well-being

**Governments should:**

- Support the establishment of standards for digital products and services that promote healthy usage patterns and well-being, including requirements for built-in wellness features and time-management tools that respect children's autonomy.
- Invest in research and evidence-gathering on the developmental impacts of technology on children, ensuring that policies balance protection with opportunities for meaningful, beneficial digital engagement.
- Promote universal digital safety, health and well-being protections that are embedded directly into platform design, rather than relying on parental oversight, recognizing that not all children have equal levels of support at home.

**Technology companies should:**

- Consider developing child-only versions of apps to create secure, youth-specific digital spaces protected from adult intrusion, with feature interfaces tailored to children's developmental stages.
- Provide flexible time- and usage-management tools, including reminders, to help children build healthy self-regulation habits and maintain a balance between online activity and offline life.
- Embed systemic safety features directly into platform architecture, ensuring that core protections function independently of parental involvement and are available to all children, regardless of their home environment or level of supervision.

### 4. Strengthen digital, especially AI, literacy for children and caregivers

**Governments should** embed comprehensive, rights-based digital and AI literacy into education systems and public awareness strategies, reaching children, parents and caregivers. These programmes should cover information literacy, data use by companies, algorithmic decision-making of AI systems, related online risks and harms, reporting pathways and supportive supervision practices. Teachers are essential partners and should receive training and resources to deliver this content effectively. Schools and community centres could establish 'safe laboratories' as trusted spaces where children can learn about online risks, rights and responsibility in an environment of trust and guidance.

**Technology companies should** contribute to States' digital literacy efforts by providing clear, age-appropriate, accessible information that helps children to understand how the companies' products and services work, how user data are processed, how to engage critically with digital tools and how to seek remedy and redress where needed – all of which would contribute to upholding children's best interests.

Overall, digital and AI literacy should begin early, following a gradual, developmentally appropriate approach to digital access. Children should receive age-appropriate education on digital opportunities, risks and ethics before they are given full access to devices, helping them to build confidence and competence from an early age. Such digital and AI literacy efforts do not put the burden of safe digital use on children – but rather add a layer of empowerment to their online behaviour.

### 5. Promote inclusive, culturally responsive platform design and deployment

**Governments should** invest in infrastructure development, including affordable connectivity, devices and reliable electricity, to close the digital divide that limits children's opportunities and well-being. This should be paired with investment in the broader digital ecosystem of child-appropriate skills training, locally relevant content and accessible services. A genuinely inclusive digital approach would also require addressing the social and cultural barriers that prevent children, particularly children with disabilities and girls, from accessing and using digital tools.

**Technology companies should:**

- Support efforts to bridge the digital divide, including through open, shared infrastructure and accessible content resources that benefit underserved communities.
- Design platforms, recommendation systems and content moderation practices that reflect diverse cultural, social, linguistic and developmental contexts, ensuring that children in under-represented regions are not disadvantaged by systems built primarily for dominant markets.
- Provide essential communication and learning tools in local and accessible formats, such as sign language options for deaf children, to ensure that no child is excluded.
- Shift business models towards greater inclusiveness, ensuring that children with disabilities and ones from lower-income families or marginalized backgrounds are not denied opportunities to learn, play or participate due to cost barriers.

### 6. Improve reporting, redress and remedy mechanisms

**Governments should:**

- Mandate minimum standards for child-centred reporting and grievance mechanisms, including clear expectations for response times when technology companies receive reports of harmful or illegal content.
- Ensure that law enforcement and regulatory bodies are adequately resourced to provide timely follow-up, investigation and remedial actions.

**Technology companies should:**

- Reduce barriers to reporting by increasing transparency around related processes, accelerating response times and ensuring that redress mechanisms are accessible, effective and sensitive to stigma and fear of repercussions.
- Apply consistent and proportionate consequences, including permanent bans, for users who repeatedly engage in harmful behaviour such as bullying or discrimination.

### 7. Uphold a holistic child-rights-based approach through interoperable regulation, practice and accountability, as well as child-rights impact assessments

**Governments should:**

- Ensure that policies and regulatory frameworks give balanced attention to all children's rights, including safety, privacy, participation, freedom of expression and non-discrimination. The principle of the best interests of the child should neither override other rights nor be reduced to a procedural requirement.
- Require companies to conduct child-rights due diligence, including child-rights impact assessments, and make these assessments publicly available.[x]
- Prioritize enforcement of existing legislation, promote regulatory alignment and interoperability across jurisdictions, and address gaps where harms are not adequately covered. Regulatory action should target specific harmful features and practices rather than imposing blanket restrictions on children's digital use (also see UNICEF report on 'Keeping Children Safe Online').
- Introduce legislation making technology companies subject to clear accountability measures, including transparency obligations, consequences for non-compliance and ongoing monitoring as technologies evolve.

**Technology companies should:**

- Conduct child-rights due diligence, including child-rights impact assessments, for all digital products and services, to examine how content moderation, recommendation systems and algorithmic curation affect children's autonomy, access to information and other rights.

### 8. Ensure government responsibility for upholding the Principle

**Governments should** retain primary responsibility for assessing, determining and upholding the Principle through legislation, regulatory guidance, oversight and enforcement mechanisms. They should establish – or assign responsibility to existing – oversight or regulatory bodies to assess and determine children's best interests, offering a framework for how to do this. Governments should consider legally mandated standards requiring digital products and services used by children to meet best-interest and safety requirements before launch.

**Technology companies should** align their practices with applicable guidance and legal standards rather than defining the Principle unilaterally. Implementation should focus on how best interests are operationalized across digital product and service design, business models, governance and safety

systems, in a way that is consistent with child-rights-by-design approaches, rather than seeking a universal or abstract definition.

The final recommendation is foundational and cross-cutting to all efforts – without it none of the other recommendations can be implemented well.

### 9. Institutionalize meaningful child and youth participation in strategy setting, policy design and decision-making

**Governments and multilateral institutions should** encourage and, where appropriate, require formal mechanisms for the sustained participation of children and young people in the design, monitoring and evaluation of digital policies. This participation should be ongoing and embedded in policy cycles, as part of a more responsive, accountable and intergenerationally informed approach to digital governance.

**Technology companies should** engage children and youth with robust child safeguarding measures in place, alongside child psychologists, child-rights experts and diverse community stakeholders, in participatory consultations, co-design and evaluation processes. Such efforts go beyond market research or user testing, and must ensure that children's inputs are given due weight and seriously taken into account in product, policy and governance decisions. This could include sustained feedback loops where children can vote on safety features or propose improvements, and see how their input influences decisions. Companies should document and publicly share these practices to demonstrate how children's best interests are prioritized in platform design and governance, and how child and youth perspectives help shape decisions with immediate and long-term consequences for their lives. Child consultation should be part of child's rights impact assessments, when conducted responsibly, meaningfully and under the necessary conditions.

# Annexes

## Annex A: Methodological note on child consultations

Seventeen consultations were conducted for this project, using creative and participatory methods such as drawing, modelling and role-playing.

### Sampling

A total of 209 children aged 10 to 17 from a mix of seven low-, middle- and high-income countries participated in in-person consultations. In four of the seven countries, consultations were conducted in more than one region. Only in Brazil (São Paulo), Uganda (Kampala) and Sierra Leone (Freetown) were consultations conducted in a single location. However, in Uganda and Sierra Leone, local partners facilitated transportation for some children from nearby rural areas to ensure their inclusion.

In Spain, one consultation was held in Castrillón and a second in Madrid. In India, two states – Assam and Madhya Pradesh (MP) – were selected, with two consultations conducted in each. In the USA, two consultations took place in greater Los Angeles, California, and one in Atlanta, Georgia. In Malaysia, one consultation was conducted in the state of Sabah, with another in Johor state. A detailed country-by-country sample breakdown is presented below.

| Country and state or region | 10–13 age group | 14–17 age group | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Brazil** | 12 | 11 | 23 |
| **India: Assam and Madhya Pradesh** | 21 | 23 | 44 |
| **Malaysia: Sabah and Johor** | 19 | 14 | 33 |
| **Sierra Leone** | 10 | 11 | 21 |
| **Spain: Castrillón and Community of Madrid** | 14 | 10 | 24 |
| **Uganda** | 13 | 14 | 27 |
| **USA: California and Georgia** | 9 | 28 | 37 |
| **Total number of children** | 98 | 111 | 209 |

## Recruitment

The recruitment of children was conducted in each country through UNICEF country offices and local partners. Sampling was purposive to ensure diverse representation within relatively small groups, with consideration given to several characteristics such as location (urban/rural), socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, culture, disability and LGBTQI+ identity. Overall, the children were recruited from a range of contexts, ensuring gender diversity within the groups. All the participating children had experienced some exposure to digital technologies.

## Ethics approvals

The study received ethics review approval from the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board in September 2024. In countries where local ethics approval was required, this was secured by local partners with support from UNICEF country offices and UNICEF Innocenti. Local partners completed a two-day training programme on study methodology, ethics procedures and child-safeguarding protocols.

## Safeguarding

During the consultations, the facilitators provided clear verbal explanations regarding the purpose of data collection, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, potential risks involved and the safeguarding protocols in place. Data collection, storage and management adhered to the UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis.

## Description of activities

The child consultation methodology was a participatory programme designed to engage children in a safe, inclusive and age-appropriate way to explore their rights, experiences and perspectives relating to their best interests in the digital environment. The sessions were structured progressively, beginning with trust-building activities, priming and explaining the best interests through everyday examples children could relate to  before conceptualizing complex ideas such as participation, child rights and decision-making. The process culminated in foresight and futures-thinking exercises in which the children modelled and voted on preferred digital futures. Key activities are described below.

## Session I: Introduction and priming

**Objective:** Clarify the purpose of the workshop, secure verbal consent and respond to any questions raised by children regarding the project and their role in it.

The children were introduced to the Principle through a **playground story** illustrating how stakeholders' interests can sometimes conflict and how children's own interests can have potential tensions. The discussion then shifted from the playground to the digital world, with the children exploring what is and is not in their best interests online.

### Session II: Conceptual foundations (scaffolding, case study, debate)

**Objective:** Increase children's understanding of their rights and the key assessment factors considered when determining their best interests in decision-making processes.

The children built a **tree of children's rights** to familiarize themselves with their key rights and the elements used to assess best interests. The 'tree' had six branches (voice, identities, privacy, learning, play, and health and safety), each representing a different right. For each branch, the children discussed how digital technologies could support or undermine the respective right.

The children then discussed the design of an online space for children, Fundo World, which included games, video sharing and social/community elements. They examined four **common platform features** – age assurance, supervision by parent or guardian, content filters and recommendation tools – and discussed how each affects children's rights in terms of what works, what does not work and how each feature could better serve children's best interests.

### Session III: Applied scenarios (role-playing, case study, debate)

**Objective:** Examine how children perceive and balance their best interests against those of parents, peers and technology companies, and how they evaluate decisions and digital implications affecting their rights.

The children **role-played as decision-makers** through two groupwork scenarios:

- a business team in a gaming company discussing the business model for a new gaming app (e.g., advertisements vs. paid levels).
- a government deciding whether to ban a video-sharing app that uses AI, as some children find it creative and fun, but others are harassed in comments or embarrassed by videos that depict them without their consent.

The children then indicated whether they believed the existing digital technologies were in their best interests by physically positioning themselves on different sides of the room.

### Session IV: Futures and foresight (imagining)

**Objective:** Understand how children think of the future in relation to their best interests.

The children **imagined digital futures in their best interests** by creating physical models using materials such as Lego bricks and pipe cleaners. This was followed by a discussion of **what actions should be taken, and by whom**, to make these futures possible.

### Session V: Closing

The children articulated their **wishes for the future** and attached notes with those wishes to the rights tree.

The full methodology is available on the project website.

### Limitations

The methodology was piloted in Italy and conducted in English because the participating children spoke English. Country-specific pilots were not undertaken. Although adaptation workshops were held in each setting, it is unclear whether these were sufficient to ensure that the tool was fully adapted to local contexts and consistently understandable for the children.

The abstract nature of the 'best interests of the child' principle represented a challenge for some participants. Despite efforts to explain the concept during the consultations, younger children found it difficult to fully grasp it. The best interests may also translate imperfectly across languages and cultural contexts, potentially affecting participants' comprehension and responses. Consultations were conducted in local languages to support accessibility, with data subsequently translated into English; inevitably, some nuances may have lost in translation.

The consultations achieved gender balance, with equal representation of boys and girls. However, the transcripts did not systematically identify participants' gender, and therefore gender was not included as a variable in the qualitative analysis. Gender-related issues were only reflected in the analysis and report when participants explicitly raised gender-specific barriers; in such cases, the gender of the participant was not indicated.

The methodological approach created a relatively time-intensive process, with consultations lasting approximately six hours, including lunch and short breaks. As a result, some children, particularly the younger participants, experienced fatigue during the later stages of the consultation. This may have reduced engagement and limited the effectiveness of some activities.

## Annex B: Youth engagement with children's best interests in the digital environment

To deepen and contextualize the children's perspectives, UNICEF Innocenti engaged its **Youth Foresight Network** of young futurists to interpret the consultation findings through a future-focused lens. A global call for youth participation generated 624 responses, with all applicants completing survey questions on the past, present and future of the digital environment. From this pool, 30 adolescents and youth from around the world, and with diverse backgrounds, experiences and interests in the digital environment, were recruited to form a network to analyse and respond to children's concerns and aspirations. Young people were actively involved in the design and delivery of the process and outputs. Their contributions ranged from analysing and categorizing the children's data to co-designing and participating in two online workshops and developing detailed recommendations. The youth report[xi] presents insights drawn from the surveys and workshops, and its core recommendations have been integrated into this report. Bringing a youth context and perspective into the research enabled us to develop an intergenerational understanding of children's desired futures and how these can be realized in the digital environment.

## Annex C: Expert Consultation Participants

| Name | Position | Organization |
|---|---|---|
| **Hye Jung Han** | Lead on HRW's work on children's rights and technology | Human Rights Watch |
| **Siva Mathiyazhagan** | Co-Director of SAFELab and Founder of Trust for Youth and Child Leadership (TYCL) | UPenn |
| **Stephen Balkam** | Founder & CEO | Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) |
| **Elvis Fokala** | Manager, Children's Rights Unit | Centre for Human Rights at Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria, SA |
| **Laura Higgins** | Senior Director of Community Safety & Civility | Roblox |
| **Liz Thomas** | Senior Director of Public Policy, Digital Safety | Microsoft |
| **Brian O Neill** | Emeritus Research Fellow | Technological University Dublin (retired) / Freelance |
| **Sami Jaber** | International Policy Officer | 5Rights Foundation |
| **-** | - | Coimisiun na Mean (CNAM) |
| **Caroline Hurst** | Senior Digital Child Safety Manager | LEGO |
| **Pascale Raulin Serrier** | International Relations Officer, Public Awareness Department | CNIL (French Data Protection Authority) |
| **Amanda Third** | Professor | Western Sydney University |
| **John Livingstone** | Head of Digital Policy | UNICEF Australia |
| **Sashwati Banerjee** | Director and Regional Lead, Founder Top Parent | Dalberg Media Asia, Nudged Trust |
| **Cees van Koppen** | Lead for Safety Policy in EMEA | Snap |
| **Mariesa Nicholas** | Director of Research & Evaluation | Australian eSafety Commissioner |
| **Jaimee Stuart** | Head of Research (Acting) | United Nations University (UNU) |
| **Jen Persson** | Director | Defend Digital Me |
| **Sonia Livingstone** | Director of Digital Futures for Children | LSE |
| **Jennifer Kaberi** | Founder | Mtoto News |
| **Hans Martens** | Head of Digital Citizenship | European Schoolnet |
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# Endnotes


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# Acknowledgements

This report was produced by the UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti under the guidance of Daniel Kardefelt Winther, and was authored by Bella Baghdasaryan and Steven Vosloo.

The authors express sincere gratitude for the invaluable contributions to the research provided by UNICEF country offices in Brazil, India, Malaysia, Sierra Leone and Uganda; UNICEF National Committees in Spain and the United States; as well as local partners (Alana Institute Brazil, Monsters Among Us (MAU), Uganda Child Rights NGO Network (UCRNN)); and facilitators in all participating countries. Without their support, this research would not have been possible. The research team also appreciates the support provided by Lucy Szaboova in the analysis of selected data and the drafting of the report.

Gratitude is extended to the following colleagues for their peer review of the report: Adam Sharpe, Belén Andrade Pérez, Daniel Kardefelt Winther, Jessica Sercombe, Josianne Galea Baron, Laxminarayan Nanda, Lolichen Pullemplavil, Mario Viola De Azevedo Cunha, Padmanav Dutta, Robby Omongo, Shai Naides, Sharmila Ray, Silvia Casanovas Abanco, Wani Nur Imannina (UNICEF), Coimisiún na Meán (Ireland) and Michael Murray (Information Commissioner's Office, UK).

Special thanks are also due to the Expert Advisory Group for their continued support for the Best Interests of the Child in Relation to the Digital Environment project: Alexandre Barbosa (Cetic.br), Caroline Hurst (The LEGO Group), Coimisiún na Meán (Ireland), Jennifer Kaberi (Mtoto News), Josianne Galea Baron (UNICEF), Michael Murray (Information Commissioner's Office, UK), Sabine Witting (Tech Legality), Sashwati Banerjee (Independent specialist, Founder of Top Parent) and Shafika Isaacs (UNESCO).

UNICEF Innocenti is implementing the project in partnership with UNICEF USA and with funding from Google. Special thanks to Anne Leong, Kayla Allen and Kimberly Laney (UNICEF USA), and Emily Cashman Kirstein and Jennifer Kotler (Google).

Finally, the authors are immensely grateful to all the children who shared their experiences with the research team, and for their time and valuable contributions to this research.

**Copy editing:** Thomas Storey
**Layout:** Benussi&theFish
**Photography:**
Cover photo: © UNICEF/UNI608336/Nazir Sufari
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**UNICEF**, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

**UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti** accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

**Published by**
UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti
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50121, Florence, Italy

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Web: unicef.org/innocenti | data.unicef.org
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**Suggested citation**
Baghdasaryan, B., and Vosloo, S., *Children's Best Interests in Digital Policy and Practice: From the voices of children, youth and experts around the world*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, April 2026.

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